



Omae wo **OTAKU** ni
shiteyaru kara
Ore wo **RIAJU** ni
shite kure !

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Omae o Otaku ni Shiteyaru kara, Ore o Riajuu ni Shitekure!

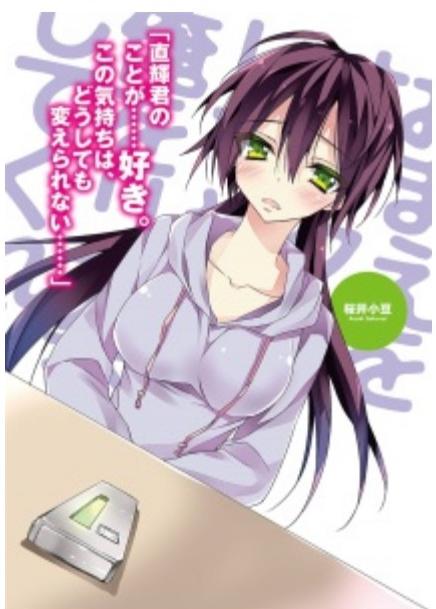
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Chapter 1

“Kashiwada-kun...I like you...as a member of the opposite sex...”

“I...like Naoki-kun. These feelings won’t be changed no matter what.”

New Year’s Eve.

With the winter comic fest 3 days away, we had my part-time job’s year-end party at the same time. Being unable to go to the winter comic fest for various reasons, I attended the year end party at this part-time job. It was there that I was reunited with my first love from middle school, Oikawa Kizuna, and we returned home together. But~ I don’t feel that way about her anymore so much.

“Contact from: Koigasaki Momo”

“Contact from: Sakurai Azuki”

Seeing these messages on my phone’s screen, I was taken aback in surprise. And I quickly gave my farewell Oikawa and as I quickly walked, I pressed the call button to return their calls.

—Azuki-chan. The girl I couldn’t contact no matter how many calls I made or how many messages I sent. The night of Christmas Eve, some crazy things were said and she has sadly been keeping her distance from me since; she is my girlfriend. How tired of waiting was I for getting in contact with her. The sound of my heart beat grew stronger with each calling sound. It feels like my chest is getting crushed with unease. With this phone....what if she decisively gave out her final word...that we are to give our farewells to each other...thinking this, no matter how tired of waiting I am, no matter how much I want to speak with her, I don’t want to connect over the phone, is what comes to my thoughts.

“...H-hello...”

The next moment.

After the calling sound ended, I heard a voice I was used to, a terribly

nostalgic, lovely voice.

“Na-Naoki...kun?”

Hadn’t heard that in a week, her voice. My heart beat even harder.

“...A-Azuki-chan...it’s been a while...”

Trying to keep my cool as much as possible, those are the words I let out.

“We finally...connected on the phone, huh...”

“...S-sorry...Naoki-kun, for...ignoring you all this time...”

She, in a weak voice that seemed like she was about to cry, apologized to me. I was wrapped up in a bit of anger, but upon hearing her voice, those feelings were blown away.

“I-it’s fine...since we can talk now...”

Surely she had some profound circumstances of her own.

“Naoki-kun...thank you.”

“O-oh...ah...well...”

I was tripped up for words. There’s so many things I want to say, but nothing that seems fine to say came to me. There’s so much I want to say, but the thing I want most to convey to her is...my feeling that “I do not want to break up. Even now I like you, Azuki-chan.”

I’ve got to say it...no matter what subjects I disregard, I must convey that to her.

“Naoki-kun...well, I have something important I wasn’t to talk to you about, but...not over the phone, I want to meet with you in person....This might be a bad time, but, right now, could we meet...? I’m close to your house, so I can go there...”

Something important to talk about. Hearing these words, I had a heart-piercing thought. Could it be, a conversation about breaking up...? A full-blown one...?

“I, I understand! Then, I, right now...will head to your place since I’m close!”

] "...Eh? I-it's fine, that...it's something I want to do selfishly, and getting to you from here is..."

"Going out like this late at night is dangerous, I'm saying! And I remember how to get to you from here, I'm coming right now!"

"Na-Naoki-kun...! Same as always...so kind."

Azuki-chan said in a gentle voice. Hearing such a voice...makes all these loving feelings overflow.

"Understood, then I'll count on your word..."

With Azuki-chan satisfied at that, I will contact her again when I am almost to her house, and so I hung up here. I return the way I came, and once again to board the train from the station. I had the feeling of wanting to reach her even just one second faster, but at the same time, I felt as though it would be OK if this train wouldn't reach where she is for an eternity. It was with these two contradictory emotions that my heart rushed about. Azuki-chan was waiting at the nearest station to her house. She gazed at my face, and a smile that was a little lonely arose on her face.

"Long time...no see..."

The figure of my beloved girlfriend whom I haven't seen in days. Though it is in these circumstances, the pure feeling of happiness from meeting her after so long ruled my heart. I want to touch her, oh what feelings overflow.

"I'm sorry, I've called you out here so late on New Year's Eve..."

"Oh, no...it's fine..."

That moment, I saw something sparkle and shine from her ring finger to my eyes. Azuki-chan...was wearing the ring I gave her on Christmas Eve.

...It wasn't as though we broke up...maybe it was only I who was thinking that something like that had happened...?

"I can't calm down around here so...let's take a bit of a walk."

"Eh!? Ah, OK..."

At Azuki-chan's proposal, we moved to a park near the station.

“I am sorry!”

Just as we reached the park, Azuki-chan, with a tremendous fervor, looked at my face and apologized.

“...Eh?”

I was suddenly terribly disturbed. Sorry, she says...does that mean that she wants to break up with me after all...?

“The night of Christmas Eve...I finally had a chance to go on a fun date with you, and you gave me this wonderful present that did not deserve, and it was supposed to be a happy day, yet...I went and did that, spoiling it...I am truly sorry!”

“Eh? A, ah...no..”

“That’s not all...after that, I continued to ignore so very many of your messages and calls one-sidedly...truly, though I am the worst, my apology isn’t enough to warrant your forgiveness...”

“N-no...it’s fine...you probably had your own circumstances, Azuki-chan, and since I understand that...”

My voice was shaky. Certainly, she did hurt me. But now, more important is what she is thinking now, why she did that, what she wants to talk about now...these are what are tremendously important. I want to hurry and hear about them. I didn’t come here today just to hear an apology.

“About today’s winter comic fest...you weren’t able to go because of me, right...so even though we promised to have everyone go and support Momo-chan...I said something selfish about going by myself and made you worry...”

“Eh...!? That’s not right...”

“...Eh?”

“No, ah...it’s a horribly pitiful story, but...I just didn’t have enough money to go to the winter comic fest...”

“I-is that...right...!”

Azuki-chan said, and after making a shocked face, she looked at her hand. Oh no, did she realize the reason I didn't have enough money was because I had bought her that ring as a present...? Why did I come out and say that so bluntly, me?! I'm just making her worry about me for no reason again....After Azuki-chan looked at her finger she looked at me with a heartrending face and was about to say something, but I interceded her and spoke first.

"Well, more importantly..."

It was also to change the subject, but more than that I wanted to cut straight to the point.

"Today, I've come here to know how you feel, Azuki-chan."

To my words, Azuki-chan looked at me with a surprised expression.

"Eh...?! Ah, well...umm..."

She was trying to say something, bu tit seemed as though she couldn't get the words out. I lightly took a deep breath, resolved myself, and opened my mouth.

"I...even now, like you, A-Azuki-chan...I don't want to break up with you...!"

"...!"

Those were the words that, no matter what else got disregarded, I wanted to convey to her today. Azuki-chan once more looked at my face with a surprised expression, and continued to fixedly stare at me. That face seemed fairly pained.

"Naoki...kun..."

In her eyes, tears started to gather. I waited for the next words to come out of her mouth. It felt as though my heart was about to burst. That moment felt like an eternity.

"This..."

The words next out of Azuki-chan's mouth were fairly short. While she said these words, she pulled out of her bag and held before me a CD ROM inside a case.

“Eh...? This is...?”

“I-inside this...are my feelings, all in there...after hearing this, I want to again... hear your feelings, Naoki-kun.”

“Eh...”

From Azuki-chan’s shaking hand, I took the CD ROM. Azuki-chan ‘s feelings are inside here...? What does this mean? Is it that she can’t say them here and now? She wants to hear what I have to say after listening to this...? I don’t know what’s in this, but I don’t think my feelings will change. I...like Azuki-chan. I do not want to break up with Azuki-chan. In an instant, my imagination runs wild in my head.

“I no longer like Naoki-kun, so I want to break up.”

If such words were recorded onto this by Azuki-chan...no, wait, if that were the case, why would she say, “After hearing this, I want to again hear your feelings”? If it were that sort of thing, then why not say it here and now? But, it’s kindhearted Azuki-chan, so she might not want to hurt me standing right in front of her...

“Thanks for coming all this way....My business here is finished now...”

“Eh...ah, ah...umm...”

“Well then...ah...Naoki-kun, to a good New Year.”

Azuki-chan said that to me with a sad smile and moved to leave the park.

“I-it’s late...I’ll walk you home...”

“Eh? Ah, it’s fine...you too, Naoki-kun, be careful on your way home.

It ended all too surprisingly quickly, the reunion between Azuki-chan and I. Perhaps it lasted about 5 minutes. On the train home, as I stared at the CD ROM she gave me, various thoughts made the rounds in my mind. As soon as possible, I want to get home and listen to what it says. I’m incredibly scared, but...despite that, I want to know her feelings. As I rode on the train, it crossed my mind that I had forgotten something.

Oh yeah...Koigasaki tried calling me too. My head was full of Azuki-chan, so sorry about this, but I had forgotten that she had called me. By the time I got off the train to head toward my house, the attention I had on the CD ROM grew smaller, and perhaps because it might be urgent, I figured I would call back Koigasaki. But, no matter how many times the calling noise rang out, it would go to the answering machine. Exactly what did she want? Today she should have been the salesgirl in Nikaidou-san's circle at the winter comic fest. She called around 7, so the winter comic fest should have been long over by then. Does that mean she called because she thought it was strange I didn't go to the winter comic fest? Well, if it's about something important, she'll probably call again. Recently, it's rare for her to contact me, so I'm interested in exactly what business she has with me.

"I'm home!"

"Oh, Naoki, it's quite late. You'll eat some New Year's Eve soba, yeah?"

"Naoki! Linked Horizon's turn in the Kouhaku (TL note: an annual contest between popular female and male singers on New Years Eve) is already over!? What were you doing until this time?!"

Ignoring the voices of my mom and little sister, I rushed into my room at full speed. I immediately turned on my computer, inserted the CD ROM, and put the earphones in my ears. Right after loading, a folder appeared on the screen. In that folder were 2 files. They were both audio files, and their titles were "1.mp3" and "2.mp3". Anyway, I click on "1.mp3".

What I heard through my earphones was not Azuki-chan's voice. After some music were the words of someone.

"Alright, the time for Vocaloid Radio's 'Ereraji' has come!"

Vocaloid radio...? Anyway, it's a recorded song playing on the radio. The male MC is certainly a voice actor Azuki-chan likes. I continued listening through my bewilderment, and in the opened CD ROM case there was a label I noticed. It

had “1.mp3 file->13 minutes 38 seconds” written on it. Is this Azuki-chan’s writing? Following the label, I slide the audio progress bar to the 13 minutes 30 seconds mark.

“Ahahaha, that’s right~. Ah, here we have another request. From Tokyo, her radio name is Momotaso-san, and she is a young lady in her first year of high school. Composed by Shinagawa P, sung by Hibikine Ruru, ‘I am your princess.’ Enjoy!”

...”I am you princes.”...is? This song is the one Koigasaki played using Suzuki’s band. That song I got used to hearing, “I am your princess.” started playing. Azuki-chan told me “All my feelings for you are in here” and gave me this CD ROM. So, I really thought she had recorded herself speaking in her own words. But, in reality, what was recorded was a Vocaloid radio show. At this rate, just what was Azuki-chan’s intentions in giving me such an audio file, I really don’t get it.

“Well~what a lovely song~! I will read the message from Momotaso-san..

“Hello! I like Vocaloid music, and enjoy listening every week. I have a request for Shinagawa P’s ‘I am your princess.’ I sung this song on stage at my school’s culture festival. That time, the boy I liked in the light music club played the guitar while I sang, and this made me very happy!...Wow, that’s youth for you!”

...Eh? Sang the song at the culture festival? Liked a boy in the light music club...? Oy, wait a minute... isn’t this about Koigasaki?! The one who requested this was...Momotaso, was it? Could that be...Koigasaki!? Oh yeah, earlier they did say it was a young lady in her first year of high school...it’s all the same circumstances. The same age, and there’s no reason for this to be anyone else, so no matter how I think about it, this has got to be Koigasaki herself. That girl, when did she put in a request to the radio? And, a request on a Vocaloid show at that, she’s such a Vocaloid otaku. Gathering my focus again, I listen to the continuation of the radio broadcast.

“Um, there’s a continuation to her message.

‘But after the culture festival, I no longer like the boy from the light music club, but have an interest in my male friend who has supported my love up until now!...’

...Eh?

To the radio MC's lines, my mind went blank for a moment.

"This person has always helped me in my attempts at love, and even when I was mean to him,k he was always thinking of helping me, he's always so kind, and whenever I'm in trouble he always volunteers to help me; I have been about to fall for him so many times. But this person always likes someone else, and understanding that, I absolutely have not been able to let myself fall for him.' Woah! What a painful love!?"

Just what exactly...is Koigasaki saying? Just who is she describing...?

"In addition to that, there's another reason I cannot like him in such a away. That is, my dearly beloved friend has liked him as well. I definitely don't want to betray my friend, and I also had this feeling of wanting my friend and him to be happy together. They both love each other, and their interests match, so I think they would go well together. They have since started going out. They were, as expected, quite happy together, and I couldn't let my emotions out. That time, I was able to confirm that I liked him. Now this song 'I am your princess.' just makes me think of him..' Wow, that's sad! This is too sad! This girl is just a high school-er but how much experience in love does she have!?"

I stopped the sound file right there and sat absentmindedly in front of my computer.

What was that, the story just now...? A story Koigasaki made up? No, everything...was exactly right. Her circumstances too...this can't be...

I mean, didn't she like Suzuki? She said our agreement was nullified because her relationship was going so well with him...

—Koigasaki liked...me...?

No longer able to think about anything anymore, I flopped onto the floor of my room. It's not mind-blowing, but I simply cannot believe this.

Suddenly the thought came into my head that there is another file. Oh yeah, there was another file. What exactly is in that? I hurriedly worked my way up and clicked on the other file, "2.mp3". Immediately, the file played.

"Naoki-kun...did you listen to file 1? I'll speak to you from here out as though you did, so if you opened this file first, please close it and listen to file 1 first."

Azuki-chan's voice was recorded therein.

"I'm sorry for making you go in so many circles. What you listened to is a radio program with a voice actor I like as the MC, so every week I record the broadcast to listen to it. In speaking with Momo-chan, this radio program never came up, and I've never told her I like this voice actor, so I don't think she knew I would be listening to this radio program. And no matter how you think about it, doesn't it strike you that this 'Momotaso' on the radio is Momo-chan? When I listened to it, I was incredibly surprised."

So this also shocked Azuki-chan like it was a surprise attack...just like me now.

"I mean, until now, I had thought she liked Suzuki-kun. But, you know, if I think about it, there were many times when I thought Momo-chan might just like you. After all, you two got along so well and were so close, and by helping her with this boy she wasn't good with getting to like her, I think that helped open her heart to you, Naoki-kun. I would think that if Momo-chan didn't like Suzuki-kun, she'd surely like you, Naoki-kun, I think."

I just listened, dumbfounded, to Azuki-chan's words.

"Thinking back, Momo-chan was always invested in your and my relationship. I had told her that I liked you, Naoki-kun. But the truth is...Momo-chan had also liked you, Naoki-kun. Despite her liking you, she tried to stifle her feelings for you for my sake, and that's why she was always invested in our relationship..."

Koigasaki was invested in Azuki-chan and my relationship?...Now that she says it, there were many instances where that may have been the case., For my birthday party, she had been the one who planned it and the main one behind the preparations, yet she lied and said "Azuki-chan planned it." That may have certainly been to help Azuki-chan and my relationship...

"After listening to the broadcast, I confirmed it with Momo-chan. You heard it in the broadcast, but 'Momotaso' would be Momo-chan, right? Was that story true? Is what I asked her. And Momo-chan said, 'I wanted them to read my request, so I mixed in the truth and some lies. The part about me falling in love with the one who supported and helped my love is a lie.', but...at the time she

seemed quite disturbed and shaken, and I don't think that story was a lie. I think that Momo-chan really does, right now, like you, Naoki-kun. Since we started dating, there were so many times where I thought Momo-chan's attitude was a little weird, thinking back. It would have been good had I realized sooner..”

“...”

“When I think of Momo-chan, who had stifled her own feelings to death and helped our relationship...I just cannot disregard her and choose to be happy myself. I think that, and Christmas Eve... I said those things to you. The truth is, for some inexplicable reason, I've caused such problems and caused so much pain concerning you, Naoki-kun.”

“Azuki-chan was thinking about Koigasaki...'I want some space between us and want to be alone. We shouldn't go together.'...is that why she said those words...?!”

If so, then that means it's not like she had started to hate me...knowing the truth has made me purely glad, very much so.

“Knowing Momo-chan's feelings, I was incredibly troubled. Thinking about Momo-chan, who pulled herself away from you for my sake, my feelings became unbearable. What have I been seeing this whole time, why did I not realize Momo-chan's feelings, is what I would think. I can't think only of my happiness and disregard Momo-chan, is what I thought....What should I do? I couldn't come up with a good solution to that question, and no matter how many times you tried to contact me, I could not answer or respond. I didn't know what I should say...I am truly sorry.”

Unbeknownst to me, Azuki-chan has been suffering this whole time...

“But in these few days, I was troubled, and I was thinking always...today, going to the winter comic fest alone despite promising to go there together with you, not having you next to me, I thought, what am I doing? I thought of giving up on you, Naoki-kun, and separating from you, but I really just could not do that...I really do...like you, Naoki-kun. These feelings won't be changed no matter what...”

Azuki-chan's voice sounded like she had been moved to tears. Azuki-chan's

"like" resounded in my chest strongly.

"So...this time, at least once more, I will confess to you....To be honest, I'm scared of knowing how you feel now...so to prepare myself, it may take a bit of time but...could you wait a little? By that time I want you to be prepared to respond...now that you know Momo-chan's feelings...I at least want to hear how you feel, please."



"...!!"

Azuki-chan's audio file ended there.

“...”

My mind went totally blank. Azuki-chan’s feelings, which I had always wanted to know but couldn’t help not knowing, I finally am able to know. It wasn’t that Azuki-chan had come to dislike me. It’s the opposite...she said she likes me even now. I was super, super happy. Without a thought in my mind, it was enough to bring me to tears. But...what was more surprising than that...what was now ruling over my heart...

“Ko-Koigasaki...”

“likes me...?”

I recall the words of her message she sent in to have read one at a time. She likes me...is that how she’s been feeling this whole time?

“Always so kind, and whenever I was in trouble he’d always volunteer to help me”...what does that even mean?

“I’ve almost fallen for him so many times, but I absolutely have not been able to let myself fall for him”...?

Koigasaki...did you really, truly send in this message? Are those...your true feelings?

We’ve always had an abrasive relationship...always saying stuff like gross, otaku, lame, right...?

“Now when I hear this song, ‘I am your princess.’ I just think of him.”

That was also in the letter she sent in. I quickly go to listen to it on Nico Nico Douga, and click on the video page from my marked as favorite section. I click on the button to play, and the PV starts. I’ve heard this song so many times, but I’ve never consciously listened to the lyrics, so I don’t recall at all what kind of song it is. Now, I want to confirm what sort of lyrics it has. The prelude ends, and soon the song begins.

“When will you notice as the mean words reach their target

Almost the exact opposite of my ideal type

Sure, you're a great guy but you are outside of my romantic feelings

So you are just my male friend is how it is supposed to be

"Since when has it been like this?

Seeing you get along with nay other girl Why does that make my chest hurt?

I want to have all of your kindness and your smiling face to myself

I'll surely do something to make that happen

"Have you finally realized? You are my prince

And there is only one person I always want by my side

I want to be a princess for only you

Won't you please grant my selfish wish?"

"..."

I am pretty much in a daze.

"I just think about him."

Koigasaki said that when she listens to this song, she thinks of me. She thinks of me while listening to this song?

"It...can't be...?"

I feel something hot welling up deep in my chest. I can't stop this pounding in my chest.

Suddenly, the sound of my cell phone vibrating rings throughout my room, surprising me. Looking at the screen surprised me even more.

"Contact from: Koigasaki Momo"

Without thinking, I almost dropped my phone to the floor.

What timing...no, earlier I tried calling her back , but she didn't answer, so she's just calling me again is all it is...

Flustered, I try to delay and motion to answer the phone. But, now, with my head in such a terrible mess, if I answer the phone, will I be able to talk with Koigasaki normally?

...No, it's pointless. No matter how I think about it, hiding my current condition and speaking to Koigasaki normally or with any such convenient act is impossible. After so many times the phone's vibrations rang out, it finally stopped.

—What do I do? Do I call her after waiting a little bit? No, certainly after a little time, the mess my head is in will settle down a bit, but, even so, will I be able to talk with Koigasaki as if...nothing happened? But I am interested in why she called me....While I was thinking about such things, being able to do nothing, I got a message.

...Sender, Koigasaki.

"Why don't you answer after I called you twice?! Today, you didn't come to the winter comic fest and I thought it was strange; then I heard from Azuki-chan about your circumstances, now, and...it would be bad if at this rate you broke up with Azuki-chan, you hear?!"

Koigasaki...

Yeah, it's hard to believe that she likes me. Oh yeah, at times like these she always supports Azuki-chan and my relationship like this...

But, she...in her heart of hearts...

Unsure as to how to respond to her message, I crouched without thinking in front of my phone.

...This is bad. At this rate, just staring in front of me, this confusion I have will go mad. If I stay cooped up in here, I won't even be able to stand. I muster up my energy and fly out of my room.

"Naoki? The Kouhaku will end soon?"

"...Ah, Naoki, you mean to go out at this time?!"

"Where are you going? To the New Year's Shrine visit with your girlfriend?"

Seeing my flustered figure, my father, Akari, and mom, around the table, were flabbergasted. I unconsciously put on my coat and had prepared to go outside.

But...exactly where was I going, even I do not know. Anyhow, I just couldn't stay still like I was doing.

"Ju-just going for a bit of a...walk!"

"...Huh?"

"Wa-Na-Naoki!?"

Is he crazy? As I ignored my family who tried to stop me with such an attitude, I rushed outside. And that is how I went to walk outside aimlessly.

My head kept going back to the situation with Koigasaki, even up to now. When I got rejected by Hasegawa, with what type of feelings did she hug me tight and comfort me? Next time we met, the one to act like nothing happened and speak up was....just maybe, if she tried her hardest, it wasn't such an unreasonable desire?

When she said to me, "To you, all I am is someone you are bound together to by a pact, no?" I...

answered "You're an important friend."

That time, up until then, she had asked me severe and harsh questions, but then she suddenly stopped...

"I see."

With such a short answer, there were accompanying it dumbfounded pupils which had lost their luster. I can still vividly remember the expression Koigasaki made that day. At that time, just what kind of emotion did she have? I should have thought about it more seriously. "It" being why did she so desperately, while angry, ask what she was to me?

Because I answered in such a way, without my noticing...that relationship that I had had with Koigasaki ended. After all, when I think back to it, it's been ever since that day. —Koigasaki started to avoid me.

Could it be that she...already, by that time, was thinking of me? If so...exactly how much did my words hurt her? When I think back to her expression that day, even now, my chest hurts horribly. If my answer had been different, our relationship could have been much different than it is now. But, no matter how

much I regret it, I cannot turn back time.

Realizing this, I cry as I run.

“Koigasaki...”

I whisper this name in a small voice. I want to call out her name. I want to meet her as soon as I can. I want to hear her voice.

However...

What do I do after I meet with her? What can I now do? I, now...it's not like I've broken up with Azuki-chan. I still...live Azuki-chan. And, Azuki-chan, too, told me she likes me. So, she said she would confess to me again.

Azuki-chan's smile. Her embarrassed face. Her bitter, crying face on Christmas Eve. I can see these flash before my eyes like they happened yesterday. Thinking back, all these loving feelings com flooding forth. I don't want to make Azuki-chan sad anymore. Isn't that what I thought? Those feelings have not changed even now.

Anyway, I ran. To where I couldn't think of anything. If I would stop even for a moment, I would have to stop and crush the flood of thoughts flowing into my head. So, I would not permit myself to stop.

“Haa...haa...haa...”

...How far did I run? My tears had been dried by the wind. When I had realized where I was, it was a place I was not used to seeing. In terms of the train's route, isn't this about the 4

th or 5th

station in terms of distance that I've run? I was pretty fatigued from running without stopping, so I leaned against a nearby telephone pole.

“Haa, zee, haa...”

Even breathing became difficult, and I should have brought enough money to buy some water...as I regretted, I could hear a bell ring out from somewhere.

...It's the temple bell (TL note: this is referring to the temple bell with rings 108 times on New Year's Eve). I see, now, we're moving past the year...

While I ran about recklessly, nothing was resolved. I didn't answer anything. But, now, I didn't know running was a method of clearing up that hazy feeling I had inside.

Chapter 2

Ultimately, I wouldn't return home until after 4 in the morning.

Anyway, I ran and ran, and continued to run until it was like my legs wouldn't move anymore. Exhausted, I couldn't go further...when I thought to go home, I realized that, while the JR (Japan Railways) trains were still running because of New Year's Eve, I still didn't have money for the train fare, so I of course had only one option: to go back the way I came. But because I didn't have enough stamina to run anymore, I took my time to walk back the way I came. Not holding a key, I also wondered what to do if the door is locked, but, unusually and unsafely, the door was left unlocked, thankfully. My family probably did that for me since I ran off and left like that. Going inside, I open the door to the living room, and of course the lights are all out and everyone has gone to bed. To not disturb my sleeping little sister and mother, since the rooms are next to the living room, I use only very little light to do things like go to the restroom or get some water, but someone started moving in the darkness.

"Naoki...?"

That was Akari.

"Whoa!? D-did I wake you up?"

"I've been up. I couldn't sleep."

"Eh, is that so?"

Akari crawled out from her futon and came to the living room. We sat side-by-side on the sofa.

"Have you been running this whole time?"

So as to not wake up mom, Akari asked this in a whisper.

"Eh? Um, errr, well..."

"What happened? Did you suddenly go mad!?"

"N-no! I just had a lot of stuff...to think about..."

"...Hmm....About Azuki-san?"

Akari saying this caused me to gulp.

"Bull's Eye. Are you still fighting?"

"Eh, ah...yeah, well..."

:Why did you start fighting? I'll bet you did something weird, Naoki."

"N...no! Anyway, why are you so interested in that..."

"You've been so helpless lately that it makes me worried."

"I-it's nothing you need to be so worried about!"

"A-Akari is...Naoki's little sister, so...I have a duty to protect your future!"

"Wh-what's up with that?! Are you my guardian!?"

At Akari's words I didn't get, I was about to start venting.

"If you don't want to make Akari worry, then...properly, in a way to not cause worry, always enjoy yourself..."

"...H-huuuh...?"

"Thanks to you, big brother, your little sister is always worried about you...so there's no helping that I always have to watch out for you..."

"Wh-what are you..."

"You were silent to Akari and got a girlfriend for yourself, and...though it makes me really, rea~lly ticked, despite that, I decided I would begrudgingly support you, so...please, if you're not happy...Akari will be...troubled."

I am bewildered by Akari's words. She seems sleepy and is drowsily talking while half asleep is what I thought, but....Naturally, she goes and says that. Though we're siblings, there was no way around that being embarrassing, saying that stuff face-to-face. With this, it's like...

"Have you been worried for me like that...this whole time? Do you understand what it is you're saying? The way you put it makes it sound like you have a...brother complex."

To my words, Akari's face flared red. In a moment it seemed like she woke up.

"B...br-bro..."

My little sister scowled at me with an incredibly upset look, with her face all red. Oh no, to say brother complex...looks like I may have said too much. There's no way that's the case, I got carried away and made her mad...

"What's wrong with a brother comple—x?!"

"...?!"

At Akari's yelling voice, I was surprised and became speechless.

"A-a-a...anyway, it's Naoki's fault...OK?! Even if a boy in class confesses to me...someone with as big an otaku taste as Naoki, or someone who understands Akari as well as Naoki, and is kind like Naoki, no, someone who is kind, isn't out there! The one guilty for my class saying things like Akari hates boys is...Na-Naoki...!"

"...!? !? A-Akari, you..."

I got embarrassed listening to her. She...re-really does have a...brother complex. Even though she is always so mean to me...This is really embarrassing. Really, what is she thinking...

...But, Akari has a brother complex, eh...hmm...I see...I-it's not like hearing that from my little sister makes me even the least bit glad, though!

"Na-Naoki's...fault..."

While talking, Akari seemed to be drowsy and falling asleep. Of course, it's already past 4 AM. Of course she'd be tired since she always gets into her futon early.

"Ah, see, I get it, so go to sleep. I'll also go to sleep, so, you too, sleep."

"Hey...don't treat me like a kid, I'm still completely...awake..."

"No, no, no, you're already half-way dreaming...come on."

I took Akari's hand and led her to her futon. She calmly got in her futon, and quickly fell asleep. Of course she'd be sleepy. She said she couldn't sleep, and she looked tired enough for it.

...I hope not, but was she waiting for me to get home..? No, no, no, there's no way that's the case...

To make such an immature brat like her worry about me...I'm disqualified as a big brother...

After that, I brushed my teeth and headed to my room and entered my bed. I very quickly was attacked by a tired feeling, and lost consciousness as I fell asleep.

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The next day.

Mom woke me up around 9 in the morning; I washed my face and went to the living room. Due to a sense of tiredness and lack of sleep, I wanted to go back to my futon, but I think if I go back to sleep I can't receive my New Year's gift...and I force my tired head awake.

"Ah, Naoki, good morning."

"H...happy New Year..."

I quickly say my New Year's greeting to my father and mother in the living room. This is the custom every year, and if you don't greet them you won't get your New Year's gift.

"Happy New Year. What time did you get home yesterday?"

"Y-yeah...I don't remember it very well, but probably around 1 or something like that."

If I answered my father's question honestly, I think he'd get mad, so I tell an on-the-spot lie.

I get my New Year's gift, say my thanks, and put it in my wallet. My mother forcibly wakes up my sister, and the whole family eats my mother's homemade New Year's dish and New Year's rice cakes with vegetables. Akari seemed more tired than me, and while she was eating she seemed drowsy, so mom got mad at her. Well, she's not as used to staying up late as I am, so after going to bed at that late an hour, of course she'd be more tired than me...

After breakfast, the whole family went to our first shrine visit of the New

Year. It's another New Year custom of ours. With my father driving the car, we go to what I think is the biggest shrine around these parts.

"Naoki, why did you go out running at such a time?"

"..."

"Hey, Naoki, are you listening?!"

"...Eh!? Wh-what?!"

With me in the passenger's seat of the car with mom behind me and my mindlessness, I didn't hear her at all.

...Last night, I was so tired I quickly went to bed without thinking, but....Today, since morning, while I was eating, while I'm doing something, always...my mind keeps going back to yesterday's confusion.

...The truth that Koigasaki likes me....My brain has been full of such confusion because of this revelation. When I first woke up this morning I had thought that it all may have been a dream, but upon seeing the CD ROM Azuki-chan had given me near my computer where I had placed it confirmed that this is indeed real.

"Aww, what's with you, Naoki...Akari, do you know?"

"...Nope. Don't know."

Before long, we arrived at the shrine. Like always, after paying homage to the shrine we bought protective talismans, and the whole family drew fortunes. My fortune is...

"Gagh!?"

"Eh, Naoki, bad luck?!"

What a bad omen for the new year...

We read the details of the fortunes. Naturally, I was overwhelmed by my being the only one who didn't get something good written on his fortune, but what most concerned me was...

"Romance: you will probably go through a bad break up."

"Wha...!?"

A bad break up...? Exactly with whom does it mean to say I am breaking up...? Taking in the shock of the results of my fortune, I stood stock still there and...

“Ah...? Kashiwada...!?”

“...Eh!?”

I doubted the scene before my very eyes. That's because what I saw standing before me was the person that my mind kept turning back to in thought. Because I kept thinking of her, for a moment I thought I may have been seeing an illusion.

“Ah, Momo-san!”

“Oh, Naoki's friend?”

But...by mom's and Akari's reactions, I understood that this was not an illusion.

“...Ko...Koiga...saki.”

Yes, Koigasaki, wearing fine clothes, was standing in front of me. Seeing her in front of me, I was so surprised I couldn't say very much.

To think, I meet the person I have been thinking about all the time since yesterday, is it OK for such a coincidence to happen? I realize that Koigasaki is surrounded by her family. Like me, it appears she came to the first shrine visit of the year with her family. I haven't seen her in a while, but when Koigasaki's little sister spotted me, she started making a racket by saying “Kashiwada! It's Kashiwada!”

Next to the finely-dressed Koigasaki was a pretty woman a little older than her, who I immediately think is her older sister. Behind them were Koigasaki's parents. I've met both of them before, so I, in a hot haste, greeted them. I was thinking I better say something when Koigasaki appeared before me, and I almost yelped in surprise. While I was spacing out upon seeing Koigasaki's parents, it would seem she drew near me.

“Kashiwada...can we speak for a bit?”

With a sour face that ruined her well-dressed look, she spoke to me.

But, even though she might be mad, Koigasaki in such fine clothes was...

charmingly beautiful.

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Koigasaki and I, for a little bit, both moved to get away from our families. While both our families were eating food from a food stand, Koigasaki, who said she had something to talk about, and I moved somewhere away from our families.

What does she want to talk about...I think it's got to be about the situation with the phone yesterday, but...Since meeting Koigasaki today, I have not once looked her in the eyes. It felt as though my heart might stop if we looked each other in the eyes. Being alone together with Koigasaki...my heart has not stopped pounding.

I really, really still cannot believe it. The way she feels about me...

"So, why didn't you answer my calls yesterday? And you didn't respond to my message either!"

Naturally, Koigasaki, not knowing what kind of state I was in, is openly angry with me with her usual sour look.

"Eh...a-ah...m-my bad..."

"I don't want you to apologize, I'm asking you why you did that."

"Eh...um, well...by the time you called me yesterday I was...already sleeping..."

"...Hmmm....Then, what about a reply to my message?"

"...Eh?!"

"My message, you read it, right? About Azuki-chan....what are you meaning to do from now on?"

"Eh, ah....err..."

"I said this in my message, but you absolutely should not break up with her, OK?! Azuki-chan hasn't told me, so I don't know what she said to you, but...her wanting some pace between you isn't because she's come to hate you or anything! Azuki-chan...even now, likes you. So, you definitely should not break

up!"

I listen to what Koigasaki says, and I think. She seems to know that Koigasaki and I are taking some space from each other because Azuki-chan told her as much, but, beyond that, she doesn't at all seem to know that Azuki-chan has told me her true feelings as well as given me how Koigasaki feels.

"...A-ah..."

"Anyway, at least once speak with her properly!"

...hey, are you listening!?"

"...I'm listening...b-but, hey, Koigasaki,"

"Eh, what?"

"Why...are you always...so dearly interested in people's situations?"

If the story from the radio is true, then...Koigasaki...likes...me. Yet...despite that, oh, Koigasaki is like this, trying to desperately fix Azuki-chan and my relationship. Why..why does she go so far and hard for our situation? She values our situation over her own feelings.

"...Isn't that you..."

"Eh?!"

I didn't let what she whispered go unnoticed.

"No, nothing..."

Koigasaki furrowed her brow, and after thinking a bit, she opened her mouth.

"...If you ask why...that's because..."

"I can't leave you alone..."

With a sad expression, looking straight at me, Koigasaki...declared this. Can't leave me alone...? For some reason, after hearing that line, I had a sense of nostalgia. Yes, that day we got into our agreement...Koigasaki said that to me.

"I can't leave you alone."

Since that day, how much...has she cared about me? We were tied to our agreement, but that she "can't leave me alone": reason is when...she helped me with my unrequited love for Hasegawa, comforted me when she rejected me...

and after that, k she's tried to help Azuki-chan and my relationship. The one who has kept me facing forward to not be crushed during hard times is...even with a broken heart, the one who helped me be happy is...this is all because of Koigasaki's help.

But, secretly, the other side of the one doing all that for me...she likes...

"Kashiwada? Why did you stop talking and start spacing out?"

Hearing Koigasaki's voice, I came to my senses. Th-this is bad...just a little more and I myself don't understand why, but I would have started crying....Since yesterday my tear ducts have been ready to let loose to an absurd degree.

"A-anyway..hurry and make up with Azuki-chan! You shouldn't make everyone wait for it, so hurry and get back together."

"A-ah...yeah..."

At that, Koigasaki and I returned to where our families were. With complicated emotions, I watched the back of Koigasaki's well-dressed figure return to her family. Unconsciously I...while looking at the back of her figure, with all these emotions welling up inside me, I whispered her name.

I got back to my house later that day and sent a message to Azuki-chan.

"Happy New Year. I listened to both files on the CD ROM, and understand your feelings well. Thank you. Until your heart is ready, I will be waiting for you."

Anyway, I thought it was important that I listened to the CD ROM and understood the gist of what Azuki-chan was saying. After a long time, Azuki-chan still did not respond back.

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Three days later.

Today is my first day of work at my part time job since the new year started.

"...ah."

Crash. A gaudy noise came forth as the glass dropped to the floor breaks.

“Wa....Kashiwagi-kun, what are you doing!?”

Watanabe Aya, who had the same shift as me, came with a broom and dustpan with a surprised look about her.

“Th-tha-thank yo...ow!”

“Oy! Really, so dumb! What’re you doing trying to pick up broken glass with your bare hands!? Really, you’re spacing out too much today~! What is it? Were you at last dumped by your girlfriend you couldn’t get in touch with?”

Without thinking, I go stiff at Watanabe Aya’s words.

“Eh? Oh no, was I right?”

“Eh, ah, no...”

Today, I have been making so many mistakes at work that even I am surprised.

“Welcome~”

“Welco...!”

I went to dish out some hospitality to the new customer, but after the automatic door opened and I saw this customer’s figure, I was at a loss for words.

“Kizuna~! Happy New Year~! Hm, wha-wha? What’s wrong-?!”

“Oh, happy New Year~!...Kashiwada-kun!”

“O-Oikawa...”

That is, the figure of Oikawa Kizuna—the one I saw on New Year’s Eve, my fellow classmate in middle school.

“Kashiwada, today you get off at 3, right?”

“Eh? A, ah...”

Oikawa, why do you know the time I get off work...? Further, it’s 2:50 right now. In a little bit, I get off work.

“After this, are you free? Come with me a bit.”

“Eh...alright...”

I realize I forcibly got away from Oikawa. Thinking about it now, it feels like I did something pretty awful. What's more, I had pretty much forgotten about it up until now. You could say my mind was filled with other things...I did something pretty bad to Oikawa. And, "come with me for a bit," she said... Oikawa, what business do you have with me, coming all this way to my part time job? Is it to talk about what she tried to talk about on New Year's Eve? What kind of conversation is this...

After finishing up with the customers while Oikawa and Watanabe Aya talked amongst themselves, my shift ended. I made my preparations to go home, and I and Oikawa left the store together.

"S-so about...the other day. Oikawa...you had something to speak with me about, yeah...?"

While walking side-by-side with her to the station after leaving the shop, I apologized to her.

"A-yeah. So fervently you looked at your phone and went off somewhere, I was really surprised."

"Eh?!" Was that how it was!? I..."

"Yeah, I was so shocked I stood stock still right there."

Oikawa is smiling while talking, so I understood that she is not mad at me or anything, but...I'm a tad embarrassed for how I acted at that time. Certainly, I was very desperate then...

"I'm seriously sorry...but how come you know my work schedule today...?"

"A-Aya told me."

"Eh...?!"

Co-could it be...she heard my schedule from Watanabe Aya, and came to meet me that day...?

"Can we talk today?"

"Eh, ah...of course!"

There's no way I could refuse someone who went out of their way to meet me. It's not like we're on a date or anything, we're just talking...it's fine, right? Via train, we move to our local station and go to a small park nearby. Us two sat side-by-side on a swing set.

"A...ah, well, about the conversation..."

"Eh? Ah...there wasn't any sort of special conversation I wanted to have or anything. I happily, unexpectedly go to meet with you again...so after such a long time I just wanted to have a nice chat with you, Kashiwada-kun, is what I thought."

"Eh...!? Ah, is that right..."

I was surprised in my innermost being by Oikawa's words. It wasn't a specific conversation, she just wanted to have a nice chat with me...Oikawa was thinking in that sort of way...

"Coming to my work just for that, do you think it was too much just to talk with me?"

"Wh-!? I do not think so!"

Oikawa denied it, surprised. She does not think so. Actually...her thinking like that makes me honestly glad.

"But anyway, Kashiwada, you've changed quite a bit, eh~"

"Eh?! R-really...? From my point of view, it would be you, Oikawa, who has changed..."

In Oikawa's case, what's changed is just her outside appearance...talking with her reveals she hasn't changed much on the inside.

"You said I changed at the year end party as well...have I changed so much? In what way?"

"Eh? Do you not understand it yourself?"

Oikawa said in a teasing tone.

"Your appearance, too—in middle school you looked pretty plain...now, it's like you are a different person. That and, on the inside as well..."

I was surprisingly, even to myself, not hurt by her saying I was plain in middle school. If she's saying I've changed, it means I am not plain now; I've I've become no longer lame...is that a good interpretation? If that's the case, then I'm actually glad.

"Eh? R-really...The inside as well...what do you mean by that?"

"Eh, well, you in middle school was, you know..."

"...What!? If you've said that much you can say the rest! No matter what you say, I won't get hurt or angry or anything!"

"Eh, really...? Well, you know...you seemed very otaku like, like it felt as though you didn't handle speaking with others very well..."

Rather than getting hurt or angry at Oikawa's words, I feel satisfied. I'm self-aware of such things.

"But, now you don't seem like that at all. Even at your part-time job you seem to fit in really well, in how you speak and in matching the mood,k you're completely different. Actually...ah, never mind...I'm saying some pretty horrible things, eh?"

Saying so much, Oikawa looked at me with a worried look.

"No, it's completely fine! Even I think I was like that in the past....Actually, your saying I'm different now makes me quite glad."

"...!"

"...But, Oikawa..."

"Eh? What?"

"Um...well, to such a bad-at-speaking, disgusting otaku..."

"I didn't say that much!"

"Ah, ah...well, to such a plain otaku, you sure tried to talk to me..."

That is something that I thought was strange even until now. Why would

Oikawa, popular with both boys and girls, try talking to a plain otaku like me? Oikawa, when I wasn't there...teased by the girls in the class, saying "Do you like Kashiwada?" and her answering :I don't like him," "I tease him because it's entertaining,"...is her real answer honestly that she did that because it was entertaining? Asking her face-to-face, she might not be completely honest, but...despite that, I couldn't think Oikawa would talk to me just as a way to "tease a disgusting otaku." I couldn't think o f her...as such a terrible person. When she talked to me, she'd say things like "What manga are you reading?" or "What games do you like?" and other such normal things; nothing came up that was a subject to make fun of me.

"It didn't seem strange back then? You didn't get teased by your friends or something? Like, 'why are you talking with a guy like that?!' or such..."

Without thinking, I recalled when I was hurt because I heard Oikawa's denial and saying she was just teasing me, and asked such a question. I wasn't trying to trick her or ask a leading question or anything, but I suppose that's what it is in the end. Of course, Oikawa might not speak with me with brutal honesty. Maybe say they never said anything like that or something. After looking a tad troubled, Oikawa looked at me.

"Ahaha, yeah, well...to be honest, they often teased me, about if I liked you and stuff like that, I did talk with you a lot after all. At first, you were quite unsociable, but we kept talking, so I admired that."

Oikawa said as she laughed. That's right...when we first spoke, my heart was on max caution mode, and I had built a great wall around it. That such a normal, popular girl would talk to me, I thought she for sure must have been just teasing me. But, after that, Oikawa continued to speak with me, talking to me time and time again. Because of Oikawa being like this, I lost the caution I had in my heart. I she spoke to me, I would try hard and talk with her. At some point, her talking with me had become fun. I started to...like Oikawa. Every once in awhile, I'd bring out some courage and I would start talking her.

"Well, when my friends would ask if I liked you, teasing me, sometimes I would vehemently deny it. Thinking about it now, it's a good thing you didn't hear what I would say, Kashiwada, some of it was pretty awful~"

“...Eh...”

A bitter smile arose on Oikawa’s face as she spoke, and I was dumbfounded. I-is that so...is that what that was to Oikawa....Now, thinking about it calmly, if our positions were reversed, I think I’d probably do the same. If I kept speaking with a certain girl in my class, and some friends asked me “you always are speaking with her, do you like her?”...I think I too would desperately deny it no matter what I thought of her. Yeah, that’s all it is...until now, I...selfishly felt as though I was betrayed, and thinking only of myself I treated Oikawa like she was the bad one, myself getting hurt...

“...? Kashiwada? What’s wrong?”

Seeing me absent-minded, Oikawa spoke to me as if something were odd.

...It’s a good think I was able to meet Oikawa again after such a long time...

Now, that’s what I thought from the bottom of my heart. Oikawa wasn’t some terrible person at all. She was a kindhearted girl who talked with a plain otaku like me. My first love.

“...Hey, Oikawa...”

“Hm?”

I got off the swing and faced toward Oikawa.

“During middle school, I liked you, Oikawa.”

“...Eh...”

After my saying that, I understand the quickly reddened face. Woah, I said it... for some reason, now, I wanted to say it. That first love with never blossomed. Those words I couldn’t say then....While Oikawa was looking at my face, she opened her eyes wide in surprise.

“Se...seriously...?”

“Seriously. I mean, of course, a cute, kind girl starts talking with an otaku who is bad at communication, of course he’d fall in love. I toward be weird if he didn’t.”

Hiding my embarrassment, I blabbed more than I needed to. I understood

that the more I spoke, the more red I became.

"Ha, haaah!? Wait, you...you can say such embarrassing things fine like that! Really, I don't see you in a while and you change so much! That's a surprise!"

Oikawa as well, she was shaken by my words and went completely red.

"..I...I, I as well..."

EH?"

Oikawa, in her shaken state, began talking.

"Now, thinking about it...probably, I I...liked you, Kashiwada, I think...at the time I didn't think about it so far though.

"...Ehh!?"

I raised my surprised voice at Oikawa's words.

"I mean...if not, I wouldn't talk to you so much, right? It's just like...I don't know when, but I became interested in you. You had built a wall around yourself, and seemed so sullen reading manga during breaks from class..."

"Se...seriously?"

"Seriously."



Embarrassed, Oikawa laughed.

"Se-seriously...seriously...what to do, I'm so happy."

No longer hiding my feelings, I said those words. My first love...was a match...

At the time, there was no way I thought that was possible...it was mutual love...Oikawa also was interested in me...it can't be helped, she liked plain otaku me...I really can't believe it. I'm glad.

"Um, hey...Kashiwada! Do you, now..."

"Eh?"

"Do you have a girlfriend or..someone you like now?"

Oikawa got off the swing, came near me, and peered at my face as she asked that question. My heart was pounding at her question. I take a light breath...

"Yes, I do."

At my answer, Oikawa grew serious.

"Y-you do...? Wait a second, now, you have a girlfriend...?"

"Eh? Yeah."

"Huuuh!?"

Oikawa looked at my face with a look as if she were surprised from her innermost being.

"Eh?! What's up with suddenly raising your voice so loud..."

"No, no, no, it's strange! With this flow we have now! Wai...really~!?"

Oikawa suddenly put her hands on her head in a terrible commotion and said such.

"Well~...this disappointed feeling...seriously, what to do!?"

While making a large sight, Oikawa scowled at me with a sidelong stare.

"...Eh?"

Disappointed, she said...what's with being disappointed in my having a girlfriend or someone I like? ...Eh? In other words...?

"Ah, man, really, I thought that was a good time..."

Oikawa bashfully pat my shoulders lightly, and started briskly walking, separating from me.

“O-oy...where are you going?”

“Where’ you say, I’m going home of course! Later, Kashiwada.”

Without looking at my face, she briskly moved to leave the park.

“O-Oikawa...!?”

I-in other words...had I not been so super-self-conscious, Oikawa...even now, would have thought I was good enough to go out with...?

“O-Oikawa!...See you again!”

As her back grew farther and farther away, I, without chasing her, said such, straining my voice a little. At my words, Oikawa turned around for only a moment, and...I saw a surprising smile from her.

Later...my first love. It’s good we were able to meet. Thank you.

After that, I remembered that my phone had vibrated as I spoke with Oikawa earlier, and I opened my phone.

Received 1 new message.

“Message: Happy New Year. You listened to the CD ROM, eh? After school on the day of the opening ceremony, I will tell you, Naoki-kun, how I feel about you. Please prepare yourself (lol)”

I’m different from my middle school self who couldn’t tell others how he felt. This time, accurately...I will convey my emotions in my own words. As I look at my phone’s screen, I make firm my determination.

Chapter 3

Two days later.

Today was the day of the opening ceremony. And I was called out to by my girlfriend, Azuki-chan, for after school today.

I went to school earlier than normal and spotted someone in the schoolyard I was used to seeing. That is...someone I haven't seen for about two weeks, Hasegawa. She had been watering the flowerbed in the schoolyard. I hesitated for a moment to speak with her. That's because the last time I talked with her was last month; that was when I had helped her with the notes, but since then I feel like Hasegawa has been avoiding me. Of course, I have no real confirmation of this, and it could simply be my imagination, but...even so, we never again spoke about a meet-up of her, Yamamoto-san, and I, and for some reason I worry she never has had such a conversation with Yamamoto-san. Oh yeah, what ever did happen about that? If I speak with her in a carefree manner about having such a meet-up, like anytime to meet is fine with me~ or such..that would be fine, right? For some reason, in my heart at the time, I felt that if I didn't speak to her like this, somehow it would be like I'm neglecting her...just a tinge of that kind of uneasiness surged forward in my mind. Finally, a chance to speak with Hasegawa, just the two of us, so...

I resolved to speak to Hasegawa.

"Hasegawa...good morning."

"...! Ka-Kashiwada-kun..."

Hasegawa saw me moving forward and talked to me with a surprised expression. She stopped what she had been doing.

"Happy New Year."

"...Eh, eeh...happy new Year."

For some reason, Hasegawa seemed a bit down and didn't look at my face.

"Ah..eh, umm...You said something about meeting with Yamamoto-san, all three of us, and about that...I'm open any time, so if that conversation ever goes somewhere, just tell me."

"...! Eh, eeh..."

At my words, Hasegawa looked with a shocked expression at my face, and nodded her head in agreement.

...Yup, Hasegawa is...a little odd right now.

"..."

"W-well...it feels like we haven't spoken to each other in a long time...no, we spoke just last month, so it's nothing like that..."

The silence felt awkward, so I begrudgingly wrung out some words. Well, they were how I truly feel now, but still.

"..I'm sorry..."

"Eh!?"

Suddenly, Hasegawa shot out an apology, so I, shocked, looked at her face.

"That is, I was avoiding you, Kashiwada-kun..."

"Ha-Hasegawa..."

I was surprised by her words. Sure enough, it wasn't just my imagination; she really had been avoiding me. But...why?

"...Umm...Kashiwada-kun..."

Casting her eyes down, she faced her body towards me.

"When I...said to you, 'don't talk about that again'...I was...in shock..."

"...Eh?"

Unable to grasp what Hasegawa was saying, I gathered my thoughts.

The "that" from "don't talk about that again" is about my confession to Hasegawa. I won't say I like you or such anymore, I want you to be at ease...yes, that's what I said to Hasegawa.

"When I...rejected your confession...I really thought I was being selfish."

“...Eh...?”

Ha-Hasegawa...?

“...Those days when you were avoiding me, Kashiwada-kun, were very painful. The one at fault was me, and though I understand that such was my just desserts...thinking that you wouldn't talk to me like before made me extremely...sad.”

“Ha-Hase...gawa...”

Hasegawa looked straight at me, dead in the eye, and...seriously told me her feelings. When she rejected me, and I was avoiding her, this is what she was thinking about...?

“You, Kashiwada-kun...kindly spoke to me despite my not fitting in class, you would help me with my class representative work...what a nice person, why is he so nice, stuff like that is what was always odd. When you told me you wanted to be friends with me, I was so very happy. That's not all...you got along with big brother, and for your help...no matter how much I thank you, it is not enough....Since entering high school, I was able to open my heart...for the first time. I was terrible at making friends, but because you were there, Kashiwada-kun,...I was able to think to work hard at it.”

“...”

I didn't open my mouth and listened to what she was saying. Because of my shock, I wasn't able to say anything.

“When you confessed...I was incredibly surprised, and I still am perplexed, not understanding my own feelings....But, though it may be too late...now, I have realized my true feelings...”

“...Eh...!?”

Hasegawa looked up at me with eyes moist with tears.

“...Kashiwada-kun, I...like you. As a person, as a friend...and as a member of the opposite sex...”

To this fairly sudden event, my awareness went somewhere far away.
Hasegawa...likes...me...?

I couldn't believe it. The one I have always yearned for since the entrance ceremony, to the culture festival, until I confessed, Hasegawa Midori...how many times have I dreamed of this, the one I couldn't help being in love with, Hasegawa....

At the same time as being so surprised I could die, of course, I was incredibly happy. We aren't a good fit for each other, how many times did I tell myself that...this oh-so-beautiful and kind-hearted no matter what Hasegawa...feels like this about someone like me...?

Sort of shaken, for a short while I could not say anything.

"...Ha-Hasegawa...thank you...this doesn't seem real, I can't believe it..."

Finally, Hasegawa told me how she feels.

...From there I organize my feelings.

"...But...I-I..."

Feeling like my heart was tearing apart, I opened my mouth. I couldn't look at Hasegawa; I looked down. My chest hurt. But, I have to say it. Precisely, from my own mouth...

"Eh, I understand."

"...Eh...?"

Surprised by Hasegawa's line, I raised my head and looked at her face. Hasegawa was looking at me with a pained smile.

"Kashiwada-kun, I came to like you....I realized I had come to watch you... getting close to you, I made detailed observations...I noticed. While you were the same kind person as ever...the eyes with which you looked at me changed a bit compared to before..."

"Eh...!?"

At Hasegawa's words, my chest grew tighter. Hasegawa noticed...even that...? She was watching me like that...?

"I was able to become friends with you, I was able to like you...up to now you have let me come to know so many things I did not know before. Sad feelings, lonely feelings, happy feelings....So...thank you, Kashiwada-kun."

"Hasegawa...th-that's...that's my line! From me as well...thank you. I think it was truly good that I was able to come to like you..."

If I weren't careful, it seemed I would cry.

Because of Hasegawa, I was able to have hope for my high school life.

Because of Hasegawa, school was fun.

Because of Hasegawa, I could think of trying hard from here on out.

Hasegawa was, to me, hope itself.

Hasegawa, to my line, softly smiled.

"Kashiwada...I, from here on out...to not cause you to worry, I'll try my best."

"Eh...?"

"You have someone else who is important, and I can't go making you worry about me needlessly. O give you peace of mind, I'll properly...try my best to make other friends aside from you."

She said such and gently laughed. That smile was...almost like that of an angel. The same level as that smile on the day I met her and fell in love—the day of the high school entrance ceremony...no, this was an even more charming smile than that.

Sure enough, Hasegawa was an angel. When I first saw her and thought that, I was not wrong.

"H-hey...Hasegawa...from here on out, can we really, truly...be friends...?"

She was a tad shocked at my proposal.

"Yes, of course."

She gave a somewhat pained laugh, and gave her ready consent.

Thank you.

For accepting me...for saying you wanted to be friends...for saying I was an irreplaceable, important person.

For coming to like me.

Thank you, Hasegawa.

While I was blanking out at too much to think about, at some time the opening ceremony was ending. I return tot he classroom from the gym, say some trivial thing to Kiritani, whom I have not seen in about two weeks, homeroom ends, and it's after school. I prepare to go home, leave the classroom, and...

“...Ah...”

In the hallway, at the usual spot...my girlfriend stood. We met on New Year's Eve, so it shouldn't even have been a week since we last met, but...it really feels like it has been a while.

“Naoki-kun...I have something very important to talk with you about, is that OK?”

With her usual smile she said such.

But...I noticed that her voice was shaking.

We gradually searched out a place we could talk just the two of us alone, and ended up going to the roof.

“Naoki-kun...you listened...to the CD ROM files...right?”

Azuki-chan timidly asked me.

“...Yeah, I listened to them...”

Azuki-chan closed her eyes, took a deep, deep breath, and, as if she had prepared herself, began talking.

“I...I...”

“I like you, Naoki-kun! The one I love most in the world...! O-once again, please go out with me!”

That simple confession of love pierced into my chest. I confirm my answer in my mind.

I said nothing for a bit...took in a small breath, and spit out my next words.

Chapter 4

That day, after school, I went to work at my part-time job.

“Hey, Kashiwagi-kun, the other day, after work, did you go on a date with Kizuna?”

With the winter break over and it being a regular weekday, we didn’t have many customers, and with more free time than we knew what to do with, my co-worker, Watanabe Aya, said this to me.

“...Eh?!”

“What, were you spacing out again? Like I said, I was talking about what you did with Kizuna after work the other day~”

“A-ah...Oikawa, huh...we just lightly talked about our memories from middle school...we went our separate ways right after.”

“Eh!? After Kizuna came all the way to your part-time job to meet you, Kashiwagi-kun!?”

“Ah...well...”

“Really, what a waste~ Despite Kizuna being so popular, boys from other schools try to talk to her—“

“Eh, ah...that’s true...”

“Kashiwagi, you’re devoted to your girlfriend, I guess....Ah, but, your relationship was a bit unsteady with her, right? What’s happened since then?”

“Eh, ah...”

I was getting ready to answer Watanabe Aya’s question, but it was at that moment: the automatic door opened, and a customer came in. Seeing this customer, I was surprised.

“...Wait, Suzuki!? And, all of you...”

Suzuki walked into the shop with the members of the light music club.

“We’re here.”

I had told Suzuki where I worked, but I had not thought that he'd come here, so I was surprised.

"Kashiwada~ hey~"

The members of the light music club also greeted me.

"'We're here', you say...if you're gonna come here, at least say something, I was seriously surprised..."

Crash.

I could hear the sound of glass breaking from behind me.

Surprised, I turned around to see Watanabe Aya, who had been pouring juice, look like she had dropped and broken the glass.

"Hey, Watanabe-sa...?"

"Souta-kun?"

Watanabe Aya opened her eyes wide and called out that name. In a surprised state, she was looking straight at Suzuki.

"Eh...A-Aya-chan?"

In turn, Suzuki as well looked at Watanabe Aya with a shocked expression and called out her given name.

"?! Eh; you know each other...?"

"So-Souta-kun! Um..."

Watanabe Aya ignored my words and spoke to Suzuki. Somehow, she looked...desperate in that stat., But...why?

Suzuki, to whom she is speaking...with an unpleasant face, doesn't look Watanabe Aya in the eye.

"..."

Looking at Suzuki like this, Watanabe Aya made an expression as if she had been terribly shocked.

"...? Suzuki? This girl is an acquaintance?"

Member of the light music club, Kawano, spoke to Suzuki strangely.

"A-ah...no..well, she was classmate during middle school..."

Suzuki, explaining, seemed somewhat...as if he grew pale. Suzuki and Watanabe Aya were classmates in middle school...eh? But, even given that, the way they are now is odd. It appears that they weren't just classmates.

Anyway, Watanabe Aya cleans up the glass she broke and I finish setting up Suzuki's group's room and inform them about it, and they disappear from view as they head towards their room.

At the front, it becomes just me and Watanabe Aya, ad we are visited by an awkward silence. There's often silence before she becomes frank, but usually it is more of a mix between silence and openness. Combine with such silence during such a peaceful time at work, and the silence is painful I am very interested in what kind of relationship those two had, but...that's probably not something I can ask lightheartedly.

"Ha~~~...that was too sudden, I was super surprised~!"
The one to destroy the silence was Watanabe Aya.

"Besides that, you and Souta-kun are acquainted...seriously an amazing coincidence. You and Kizuna were also classmates in middle school, what's going on with this part-time job?"

"Ahaha...when you put it like that, it sure is incredible...umm, about you and Suzuki, what kind of..."

I boldly was going to ask what kind of relationship they had, but she interrupted my words.

"Ex-boyfriend."

"...?...!? Huh?! Se-seriously!?"

Being shocked, I spoke in a loud voice. No, that's...by how they were acting earlier, I thought that there was no way they were just regular friends or anything like that, but...even so...

"Oh my, is it really something to be so surprised about?"

"Eh, yeah, it's surprising!"

"Why?"

"I mean..Suzuki did not have ANY interest in girls, in fact it felt like he hated

them, and he'd always say he didn't need a girlfriend, so..."

The ex-girlfriend...of that Suzuki who hated girls to a shocking degree...!? He had gone out with someone before!? He's never even once told me about such a thing. So there was a time when he was interested in 3D girls, eh...I can't imagine it at all. And, if this ex-girlfriend was someone who shared the same otaku tastes as him, I still wouldn't understand it, but it's not even that: his ex-girlfriend is Watanabe, a broad who doesn't know anything about that world.

"What's up with that..."

TO my words, for some reason, Watanabe Aya changed her facial expression.

"Is that...tr-true?! Souta-kun hated women...?"

"Eh...ah...yeah...?"

Watanabe Aya's face grew pale, and she took in a big sigh.

"Haa...that might be...no, not might be...Aya's fault, perhaps..."

"Eh? What do you mean by that...? Did you bully him while you were going out?"

"Hu-huh? There's no way Aya would do something like that, what're you saying?"

If he was bullied by his older sister and his girlfriend, of course he'd come to hate women, I quickly thought, but it doesn't seem like that's the case.

"Then, exactly what did you do to Suzuki?"

"...Aya didn't do anything...in particular."

"Eh? Then, why..?"

"Aya didn't do anything while we were dating....Just...Souta-kun thought we were in a serious relationship, it would appear, but...sure enough, Aya at that time loved many men..."

"Eh? You cheated?!"

"Wrong! Ah~ so annoying! Well, if it's Kashiwagi-kun...Aya, before dating Souta-kun..he found out that Aya had done it with a lot of other guys!"

"Bu!?"

At such a too-radical admission, I blurted out such without thinking.

...ugh~~~! I had thought she was just some easy broad before, but what if... the loose thing is just an act and she's actually pure...or that she's holding such a moe element isn't something I truly suspected, but she's just truly a loose broad.~~~!!

"Souta-kun seemed to totally think Aya was a virgin, it seems. Sure, when he asked if Aya had dated or gone out with someone before, the answer was...ah, now this is seriously true, Aya had not dated anyone before..."

"You had never dated anyone before? Then why!?"

"Well, you know, during puberty you get interested in that kind of stuff? That was around middle school. By now Aya has totally calmed down, OK? That's why, despite not dating anyone, I could do it with my tutor who was in college or my brother's senpai, in whom Aya held interest."

Looking at Watanabe blab on like that without blushing, I couldn't help but think that this person is an entirely different creature than the girls I know, like Koigasaki or Azuki-chan or Hasegawa....This woman almost certainly matched the definition of a genuine trollop.

Thinking about it, she said she became sexually curious in middle school but that now she's calmed down...a lot of things seem to have happened too quickly!

"But really, Aya didn't cheat or anything when dating Souta-kun. We were really lovey-dovey, Aya really liked him and he seriously loved Aya...ah, we even promised to get married and stuff!"

Wha...!? Se-seriously....Are you saying that Suzuki was so madly in love with this woman...!?

"So...after that, he found out and,...? How..?"

"Souta-kun had walked Aya home from school, but in front of my house was an upperclassman Aya had done before. 'Why don't you message me?' is his reason for being so angry at Aya. Souta-kun was somehow able to get him to go away, but after he left, Souta-kun asked 'Who was that?' and Aya answered frankly....Aya desperately explained how we never dated, so it's not like Aya had

lied or anything, and how Aya had not gotten in touch with him at all, but..."

"A-ah...and then...?"

"Then, at that point, he had been shocked a fair, normal amount, but then...'Are there others like him?' is what he asked, and Aya didn't want to mislead him anymore, and so Aya told him about all the men Aya had done up to that point. He was dumbfounded at Aya's stories, and couldn't say anything... And the next day after that happened..'Let's break up,' he said..."

...Suzuki, you have my condolences. If I were to love a girl to the point of making future marriage plans and believed without doubt that she was a virgin, but then she were to come out with the fact that she's actually experienced with a number of guys...I'd definitely break up with her! With that, I'm sure I would come to hate women! It would become a sort of trauma!

I thought my first love in middle school was fairly tragic, but in truth it was a mutual love, but on the other hand, Suzuki's story is quite pitiful. Of course he'd come to hate women. He'd want to run away to 2D girls. It'd bring forth his childish comments about virgins.

"Suzuki...poor thing..."

Without thinking,k what was in my heart leaked out as words.

"Eh?! Wait, what's with that!? Why?! After all, Aya didn't' do anything wrong!? Actually, the pitiable one would be Aya!? After breaking up with Souta-kun, Aya dated a lot of guys, but could never like any of them...it's been over a year yet Aya still couldn't forget about Souta-kun...and when Aya tried to contact Souta-kun, he had changed his email address..."

I saw her face, which looked like she was about to cry, and thought. Surely, she's a strel, and there's no saving her (even now she likes Suzuki yet is going out with other guys; she's definitely a moll), yet for her to still be unable to forget about Suzuki because she likes him may mean that only her heart is earnest.

"When Aya thinks a reunion is possible after so long, he'd completely ignore Aya. Aya is really overwhelmed~ Meeting him again after so long...surely confirmed how much Aya likes him."

“...”

“Yup, Aya definitely cannot think...of dating other guys....It absolutely has to be Souta-kun. Aya wonders if Aya can do with only being able to date the one Aya likes the most...”

“...Watanabe-san...”

Not able to date anyone other than the one she likes the most, huh....She might just have some good in her after all aside from being such a tartlet. Despite being so sad, Watanabe Aya made a forward-looking expression.

“...Ah, that’s it! Kashiwagi-kun, tell Aya Souta-kun’s email address!”

In an instant, her sad look changed as though she had thought up a good idea, and she looked at me, saying that.

“Eh!? No, without Suzuki’s permission...”

“It’s fine, really! Aya won’t tell him that you told Aya~!”

After that, Watanabe Aya was persistent, so I said I’d ask Suzuki about it, and we somehow left it at that. That the cause of the way Suzuki would act is in such a familiar place as this is...surprising. I thought that next time, I’d wanna hear this story from his mouth. Soon enough, my shift for the day ended, I prepared to go home, and I left the shop. I turn to walk towards the station and...

“...Eh!?”

“Ah, Kashiwada-san!”

Before my eyes, I see a figure I am used to seeing walking towards me.

It was...Murasaki-san.

“Happy New Year~”

“Eh?! Why are you here...!?”

“This is really good! Actually, I was thinking just now that I might go into your workplace. I didn’t know if you’d be working or not, so if not I was thinking I might have to do some Karaoke alone by myself...”

Murasaki-san came all the way to my part-time job...yea, we did talk about which karaoke business I worked at before, but....

That aside, Murasaki and Suzuki..if you're gonna come here, tell me about It beforehand! If it turns out I'm not working at the time you come here, it'd be a visit without reason....

"I-is that so...well, it's a good thing we just so happened to see each other..."

"I want to hear about what happened after that..."

"Eh!?"

Murasaki-san's "after that", of course, is probably about Azuki-chan and me.

"Kashiwada-san, after this, do you have a bit of time to spare?"

After this, eh....After this, there was a place I was planning to go.

But...it's not as though I made a promise to go there or there's a time limit for when I can go there. In addition, I can't flat-out refuse Murasaki's invitation after she has worried so much about us.

"Yes, it's fine."

After thinking about it, that was my answer.

"Then...won't you have some tea or such with me?"

*

...So.

She indeed asked if we could have "tea" or such, but really. We are now for some reason going to a bar. Of course, this is the first time I've ever been to a bar in my life. She told me "Let's go here," and brought me all the way to this place, and I am still flabbergasted at such.

"Kashiwada-san, you're still a minor so that means you cannot drink alcohol, understand?"

"Un-understood...we even told the worker..."

When the worker came, I ordered an orange juice and Murasaki-san ordered a Shirley Temple, a fairly short and fancy name for a type of cocktail.

"Umm, Murasaki-san...I am sorry, after that I couldn't tell you anything....Even though you got so involved with us..."

I spoke to Murasaki-san my apologetic feelings.

“No...about that, I was thinking that I should apologize.”

“...Eh?”

“The day of the winter comiket...even though I said I'll find out how Azuki-san feels...afterward, I couldn't contact you at all...”

“Eh!? Ah, well, that's...”

“The truth is, on the third day of the winter comiket...Azuki-san told me everything. ‘I'm sorry for keeping it a secret up until now, I will tell you what has been bothering me all this time...’ That you had been dating, what happened on Christmas Eve, everything....She also said, ‘how things are going now is the worst, so I will accurately convey how I feel to Naoki-kun!’ So, I thought it would be good if I didn't unnecessarily say anything...”

Murasaki-san said such in an apologetic manner.

“Ah, is that so...”

“And so, the truth is...after that, I've been communicating back and forth on Line with Azuki-san, so I was told and know that she was to get across her feelings to you on the day of the opening ceremony...in other words, today. So, I sent her a message, but she still has not responded, so I have become curious...”

“I-is that so...”

I see. So, she came out here to hear what I had to say about this.

“Murasaki-san, you've worried so much about us, so I will tell you everything.”

I told Murasaki-san a general outline of the events from New Year's Eve to today. She's been in contact with Azuki-chan this whole time, she said, so she may have heard about everything before today already, though...

“...Is that how it was...”

Murasaki-san listened well to my long story.

“Kashiwada-san also...surely was extremely troubled...it must have been

terrible..."

"Welly...Murasaki-san, I really thank you for being so invested in this stuff with Azuki -chan and me."

"Eh...of..course."

"For some reason...a profound smile appeared on Murasaki-san's face.

"After all, I have feelings for you"

At her expression and that line, my heart skipped a beat. Eh? Murasaki-san...?

"...in that I view you as a valuable friend, I think."

She said with a whole-faced smile.

"Eh?! Ah, yes..."

"Not just you, Kashiwada-san, of course, but Momo-san and Azuki-san as well..."

"Yes, of course....Thank you very much."

To her words, I returned a smile of my own.

I, just now...for only a moment, expected that some other words were going to come out of her mouth. Even though I already...should understand what she just put into words. I was pretty stupid there.

Murasaki-san got 4 refills of the same cocktail she ordered in the beginning. Though she handled it well in the beginning, I could tell by looking that the drink was slowly but surely affected her. If it weren't for this, she'd be a steady adult....Well, on the other hand, it's good to know she has such a chink in the armor.

After leaving the bar, we walked toward the station.

"Murasaki-san...you're fairly drunk, aren't you?"

I grew worried for the girl who was walking unsteady.

"Sure enough, I...will escort you there."

"Noo~, it's fine~"

"No, I'm worried about you..."

“Worried? What, what’s there to be worried about~?”

“Well, I mean, like...if you’ll be able to get back home properly, or if you are seized by some weirdo...”

“...Hmph. Really, Kashiwada-san~ I am already a full-fledged adult woman? No matter how drunk I get, there’s no need to worry about me.”

“No, no, no, there’s a need alright. After all...”

Back in the past, I had felt as though it was a mood of drunkenness when talking with Murasaki-san when she was drunk despite my not drinking alcohol...

Now, I feel the same. If this mood of drunkenness was spreading...to me, then this mood was becoming a tad drunk-like. So...at this time, more than usual, I could say something a tad bold, I thought.

“After all...you’re a beautiful...woman....It’s already dark, and so, umm, I think it would be better if we were wary of weirdos creeping in this darkness...”

I said such, and I immediately regretted it.

Aaagh, how could I say such an embarrassing, useless thing...?! To be so embarrassed after saying it, I’m not drunk at all! Without a doubt, I am completely sober! I could tell that my face was growing hotter and hotter due to saying something so embarrassing.

“...Kashiwada-san...”

Saying such a thing, surely...Murasaki-san would tease me over it, I thought. Like always, she could say “You’re growing all red, how cute~”...or something. However, today, her response was...different from usual things like that.

She suddenly grew silent and stared into my eyes.

“...Kashiwada-san...Am I...beautiful...?”

With a trying expression, she stared seriously at me and said such.

“...Eh!?”

I was flustered over this line outside of my expectations. This is...exactly...?! Perhaps, is she kidding around again? IS she teasing me...?!

“Of...course...”

“...Really...?”

Staring at me pitifully, she again asked me the same thing. Her pupils are...I don't know if it's because she is drunk, but they seem teary.

“Hmm, o-of course!”

Blushing, I affirm the previous answer with all my might.

The next moment.

“...?!”

That moment, I didn't understand what just happened. Now, I am enveloped in the smell of her perfume. Her arm was wrapped around my back firmly. Her soft hair was touching my face a bit. Her soft...chest was pushed against my body.

“...Mu-rasa...”

She was hugging me tightly.

I try calling out her name, just what was I thinking...'

“...Yukari...san...”

Coming to, I called out...her real name. It was an instant that seemed like an eternity.

Eventually, Murasaki-san...slowly let go of me.

“Go-tcha”

“...Eh!?”

She had...already returned to how she normally is.

“That's no good, Kashiwada-san. If you're so full of openings in your defense, you might get attacked by a drunk woman, just like just now!”

“..!? Hu...huh...!? No, I don't think there's any curious pervert who'd attack someone like me...”

“Actually...you don't think you might be wrong on that?”

Just like always, she gave an impish laugh.

“...Eh?!...say, Murasaki-san...after getting so drunk like that, won’t you forget what happens today!?”

“Probably~ Ah, but, I would rather if I did methinks...”

“Eh!?”

“Ignoring the fevered drunkenness, reverse sexually harassing a minor...and a virgin high school student at that...”

“What!? Just now, those were decisive, plain words!? Wh-what do you know about me concerning thaat!?”

“Oh~ That’s the kind of thing you can tell by the aura, you know? You can’t hide that never been with a woman virgin aura!”

Aah~~~really! Th-this...drunkard! How can she tell!? Saying you can tell by the aura, I don’t get it! Shoot...earlier, my heart skipped so many beats I wondered if it would stop...but in the end, even drunk, she’s one to tease me, eh....

Eventually we arrived at the station.

“Ummm...seriously, I’ll escort you.”

“No, I mean..Kashiwada-sad, don’t you have somewhere you should go?”

“...!?”

“That and...I also have somewhere I need to go.”

“...Eh?!”

“This way...we’re facing Azuki-san’s home/”

“...Murasaki...san...”

“Even if I go, I’m not sure it’ll change much, however...”

While she was saying this, she wryly smiled. There’s no way it’s like that...I thought in my inmost heart.

“Well then, Kashiwada-san...keep fighting on.”

Murasaki-san cheered me on....

“...Yes! Thank you very much!”

Facing her house, I resolved myself.

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Chapter 5

I ride on the train headed to that location. Leaning on the wall of the train, my thoughts run wild.

...There's one thing that has me flabbergasted. Earlier, it was clear to anyone who can see that this woman was drunk, yet oddly enough...when she grabbed hold of me, I didn't smell any alcohol at all. Even though she was wearing perfume, before when she was drunk, she still reeked of alcohol despite having on perfume, but...this time...there was no smell of alcohol, even a little bit. However, that shouldn't be. It has to be my imagination, surely. That's because she drank 5 glasses of that cocktail called the Shirley Temple. In addition, if she weren't drunk, she...probably wouldn't do what she did to me. Well that's what I least think. So, she really has been drunk from alcohol.

Really, today in the span of a single day, too much stuff has happened. It's been a long, long day. If I'm not careful...I would probably be moved to tears a bit. At this point, my eyes would be easily moved to tears to a pitiful degree.

Now my heart beats like this...for one girl. I can't get her out of my head.

...Azuki-chan.

If I close my eyes, her face is what comes up. Her smiling face, her crying face, her angry face, that voice, that scent. It's a feeling that makes me want to cry it out. My chest hurts. It's painful. Heartrending. Saddening.

...However.

To me, I have no right to say this. Right now, more in pain than me...is surely, none else than...

Azuki-chan.

I close my eyes and...slowly go over in my mind what has happened today.

*

"I like you, Naoki-kun! I love you the most in the world...! O-once again, please go out with me!"

After school, on the roof.

I heard the straightforward confession of love from my girlfriend...

“...(gulp)...”

The words I thought to say would reach my throat...but didn't come out of my mouth. Though her voice was shaky, she declared all her feelings to me. My loving girlfriend. The one I yearned for...my girlfriend I loved. With that same Azuki-chan before me...there's no way I could say it. I was trying to say such a horrible thing. There's still time to turn back. You can fix this. Those feelings burst forth one after another. With her in front of me, my emotions swayed. I'd wonder if the conclusion I had reached myself was really fine and such doubts gushed forth.

If I'm not careful, tears swell up in my eyes.

Thinking back on it, my memories with you...are all fun. I can recall my memories with Azuki-chan as clearly as though they all happened yesterday.

Azuki-chan brought me happiness that's immeasurable. She brought me invaluable, beautiful days.

Azuki-chan always wanted to make memories and always took pictures. Let's make many more memories...I would look at her, and such is what I would think. I believed and did not doubt that Azuki-chan and I would be together forever.

When we first met, things between us were bad and hostile. At that point in time, no one could have thought we'd form such a relationship as we have now.

You liked cosplay, were an otaku, and were a fujoshi (TL note: someone who is obsessed with homoerotic comics and the like), who would soon be fanatical about BL (Boys' Love), you were my girlfriend. Even in happy times, you'd be soon to cry, you were a cry baby of a girlfriend. Even though you were so shy, from time to time you'd be shockingly bold...you always gave to me such a straightforward love....Your crying face, your angry face, your smiling face...all of it, all of it...

“I loved you...”

With tears flowing, those words came out of my mouth.

“I...truly...loved you, Azuki-chan...I want to always be with you is what I had thought..”

Azuki-chan listened to my teary-eyed words with a serious face.

“But...”

At my words, her shoulders started trembling.

Even though I thought I didn’t want to hurt her again...

Even though I thought I didn’t want to see her face become sorrowful again...

I knelt down in seiza on the floor of the roof.

“Na-Naoki...ku...?”

With both hands in front of me, I put my head against the floor in a kowtow.

I didn’t think that she’d forgive me if I did this, though.

“...I-I’m sorry...Azuki-chan...would you please...”

“Break up...with me...”

While bearing the sobbing, I finally...thrust the...worst words at my girlfriend. I didn’t have the courage to look at Azuki-chan’s face. But, just this...to do this properly, I had to look at her.

Even if it’s hard, I had to...properly look her in the eye and convey such. I still... have things I must say.

I slowly raised my head and looked at the face of the girlfriend I loved. Due to the tears I couldn’t see very well. She, without a tear or a look of surprise, was expressionless as she blankly...stared at me. I resolved myself, and spit out my words.

“...I..I, right now...more you, Azuki-chan, think I have more feelings...for...”

“Koigasaki Momo...I like...her...”

I said it. Oh boy, I said it. I, today, came here to tell Azuki-chan this. Out of so much worry and worry, this is the result of my thinking, my decision I am putting forward.

Azuki-chan was probably dumbfounded at my words, but eventually only her mouth moved into a smile.

“...Eh?”

At her response, I doubted my own eyes.

“Oh...stop it, Naoki-kun. Stop prostrating yourself. Like this, it looks like I’m the bad guy.”

“Eh...”

She laughed. I thought for sure...that she would be crying, but the one wailing is me while she’s laughing like everything is fine.

“Come on, get up.”

She grabbed my hand and stopped me up from lying like that on the ground.

“Azuki...cha...”

“Really, what’s to do with you crying? Isn’t it bad for the man to do such?”

“Azuki-chan...”

The girl who is a crybaby all the time...today has kept the tears away and is not crying.

“Sure enough, it’s no good....But, Naoki-kun, your response was about how I guessed it would be. So, I can be fine now.”

In a calm way, smiling, she said such.

“Naoki-kun...thanks for everything up until now. Fight on...confess to Momo-chan. I will be supporting you in this after all.”

“Azuki-chan...”

I could not believe her response.

To her...being able to break up with me isn’t such a big deal. This is extremely selfish of me, but...I thought it was something I had to do and just was completely pained wondering how I’m supposed to break up with her, feeling much sorrow. For some reason, I couldn’t think that it was a good thing that she’s surprisingly fine about this. I was absolutely dumbfounded by her reaction.

"Then...I'll go back to the classroom."

Azuki-chan said, and she turned her back to me and started walking.

"...!?"

But, in the instant she turned away from me...I didn't miss...that there was something shining on her cheek.

"Azuki-chan..."

Without thinking, I grab her shoulder and turn her to face me.

"...!"

In her eye...a tear was coming forth.

"...Eh? A-ah...?"

In a hot haste, she wiped her tear with her hand.

"Aah...really...this is bad...for me...for this last time...I wanted to laugh and walk away..."

I notice that one after the other, from both sides of her face, giant tears overflow from her pupils.

Azuki-chan...for my sake, until now you've been holding back your tears...!?

To leave me with a smile...? To keep me from being enveloped by guilt? Why do you, to the end...worry for my sake...?

Why must you be so kind to the last of the last with me being so horrible to you...?

If I think about it, you always...did worry about me. You thought about me the most.

"Azuki-chan...it's fine, you don't have to do such a thing..."

"I want...you to show me more of how you really feel....Until you are satisfied, be angry at me, even if you have to hit me, even if you resent me, let me see it..."

"Na...Naoki-ku..."

At my words...her face quickly changed to her sobbing.

“...uagh...(sob)...”

Azuki-chan wept so much that it seemed she wouldn’t stop.

“...uagh....uegh...ugh...”

In a hot haste she stopped my hand which I had extended to touch her.

I...no longer could hug this girl crying in front of me.

“...(sob)...stupid...liar...said I was the one you loved the most...that you didn’t want to break up...!”

“...!”

While crying, Azuki-chan...finally let out her true feelings against me.

“..I’m sorry.”

“My...first love...first date...first kiss...all of it, you stole all of it...!”

Azuki-chan’s screams of bitterness...stabbed me right through the heart. It really is how she says...I really am a really stupid piece of trash.

“Yeah, I’m sorry...”

Like an idiot who only knows one thing, my pathetic self continued to apologize and say nothing else.

“(sob)...stupid...horrible...liar...! Really...really, Naoki-kun, I...!”

While wailing loudly she had another thing to say...

“...love yoooouuu~~~~~!”

“...!? A-Azuki-cha...”

In a shockingly loud voice, she...while sobbing while crying, gave me a love confession ranked among the greatest in history. .

“I don’t want...to break up...(sob)...I always...always...wanted to be together with you...as Naoki-kun’s girlfriend...!”

No longer bothering to wipe away the tears, she continued to appeal to me.

“From here on out...I...definitely, definitely...won’t come to like any other person but...Naoki-kun...”

“....”

She didn't stop the tears.

If I lost my focus for just a little bit, I felt like I'd say something I would later regret. I couldn't overturn my decision on everything. So, I had to stifle my words to death.

If I close my eyes, the memories of her and me come up as clearly as if they had happened yesterday one after another as though they were on the inside of my eyelids.

“Mo-move—!”

What a way for us to meet, bumping into her in cosplay coming down the stairs.

“Kashiwada-kun, um...thank you very much for contacting me.”

“But...it's not like that, you said....That a sincerely kind person would be...”

“Ho-how about we...go see the movie together!? Um, not as a date...there's no one around here who wants to go see it, so...”

“Umm, it's really fine to let me be! I don't want anyone to come with me!”

“Kashiwada-kun, that's not fair. You're too kind...”

“I love...that Kashiwada -kun! The one I like is Kashiwada! My feelings...will not lose to anyone!”

“I cannot believe it...I'm so happy...I also, I as well love Naoki-kun the most in the world...!”

“Ever since that day at the Sky Tree, it's been like I've been in a dream...The Naoki-kun I loved so much is my boyfriend...that he said he liked me...”

“I want to..have many memories to remember. I don't want to forget anything we've done together, Naoki-kun...if someday, I were to forget them, I'd hate it.”

“...I like you...I love you...Always, always...no matter what happens from here on out..I love you, Naoki-kun!”

At first she was just Koigasaki's friend, but she slowly grew more and more on me. Before I could realize it, she had become the most important girl to me.

The day we had our first kiss on the beach. Without a doubt, through my life until now, that was the happiest I have ever been. My knowing the immense happiness of being liked by the one you like...is thanks to Azuki-chan. Will another day as happy as that one come again for me? That is what I thought from the bottom of my heart.

I loved her.

I loved the girl named Sakurai Azuki...

Unable to do anything to keep them from flowing, the tears continued to fall.

On that quiet roof, only our sobbing reverberated around us.

*

Looking out the train window at the very dark scene before me, I noticed the reflection of my pathetic crying face. Thinking back on today's events...when I let my guard down, I again am crying alone. The passengers in front of me notice this and start looking at me strangely. But, now, I don't have time to waste wiping away tears.

Around now, Murasaki-san should be arriving at Azuki-chan's house. Upon hearing my story, she got worried about Azuki-chan and set off towards her place. I truly cannot be thankful enough to Murasaki-san.

"It has to...get through."

I unconsciously whispered in a voice...so low that no one could hear it. They may be words I needed to tell myself.

I...no matter what, have to get these emotions through...to Koigasaki. If I don't do that, I can't look at Azuki-chan with a straight face.

At last, the train arrived at the station near her house. I strengthen my resolve and get off the train. And I at once walked towards her house.

After calling her five times, Koigasaki answered her phone.

"...Hello?"

"Umm, well...is now a good time?"

"Eh? I guess..."

“Now...I’m at your house...”

“...Eh? Huuh?! What’s up with that!? That’s scary!”

“Just a bit...won’t you come out here...?”

“Eh?...Now? At this time?”

“Ah, well...there’s something I want to talk to you about. Not on the phone, but in person, directly...”

In the time that Koigasaki was changing to come out, while I was standing in front of such a stupidly huge house, it almost felt like today’s events were not real but some illusion, and all I did was wait for her to come out.

...It appears like today is going to be one long day.

)

Chapter 6

“I-I’m sorry... For suddenly coming to your house like this.”

“Really. Just what is the issue? An emergency?”

“Ah, well...”

“... Hey, what’s with that face!?”

It would be awkward if Koigasaki’s family found out I was talking with Koigasaki in front of their house, so we moved somewhere a little out of the way after she came outside. Koigasaki looked at my face lit by a street lamp and rose her voice.

Oh no, my tears had dried, but I still had the face from when I was bawling on the train...

“A-ah... It’s just...”

“It’s not something that’s ‘just’ a tad off though!? Your eyes look pretty swollen... We-were you crying...?”

She immediately found me out...

“Why...? Did something happen... With A-Azuki-chan?”

“! Ah, well...”

“After that... Did you properly talk things out with Azuki-chan?”

“Today, after school, I spoke with Azuki-chan...”

“Y-yes... And?”

“Azuki-chan and I broke up.”

“—Huh?”

At my words, Koigasaki’s face turned pale.

“Eh, wh... What’s with that?! What did you say!?”

She grabbed my shoulders and strongly shook me.

“This can’t be right! I... Told you, didn’t I? That you definitely should not break up with Azuki-chan! I don’t know if she ever told you, but... Azuki-chan still loves you...”

“I-I know...”

“...Eh!? Then, why...”

“...”

I couldn’t say anything and looked down, averting my eyes from Koigasaki’s gaze... I have to say it. No matter what, today, I have to say it...

“Hey, Kashiwada!? Why are you suddenly not saying anything...”

“... Because I... like you...”

I didn’t have the courage to look Koigasaki in the eye. I don’t have Azuki-chan’s guts to convey to her my feelings straightforwardly like that. I’m truly pathetic. This is me currently giving my all.

“... Eh...?”

As Koigasaki seemed as though she didn’t understand what was going on, I repeated myself.

“Because I like you... I broke up with Azuki-chan. Koigasaki, I... Want you to go out with me.”

“.....”

For quite a long time, Koigasaki didn’t say anything. Opening my eyes to look at her, I could see she was staring at me flabbergasted.

“... N-no way...”

Eventually, Koigasaki whispered these words.

“... I-I mean... What about Azuki-chan? You... Liked Azuki-chan, didn’t you?!”

“... Ah... I liked her. I loved her. Those feelings were not lies. However, I... Like you more!”

Even I thought what I was saying was unreasonable. Koigasaki had an

expression as though she couldn't believe me and is looking at me silently.

"I... Don't want you to be taken by anyone else. More than anyone... I want to be with you forever..."

Those were my current and honest feelings. I know that Koigasaki liked me... Furthermore, I know that she stifled her feelings to support Azuki-chan and me...

'Why does she care so dearly about my situation?' When I asked her this, she answered "I can't leave you alone"...

More than anyone, I... Strongly love Koigasaki. I love her so much, even more than Azuki-chan...

You can't turn back time, but if you could... Now, I want to convey this to her. To me, Koigasaki is not just an "important friend"—she's much more than that.

Up to now, I would think that "*Koigasaki likes Suzuki so...*"

and like that, bring myself to try to not like her, similar to Koigasaki.

Since long before, even while making our cooperative agreement... I didn't want to her to go out with Suzuki deep in my heart. When the distance between her and Suzuki would close, my chest would hurt.

But, I pretended to not see my own feelings. It was a love that certainly would not come to fruition, so I had put a lid on the just-budding love I had. I acted as though I had no such feelings.

The truth is... I didn't want Koigasaki to be taken by anyone else. As in, even by Suzuki. When this situation first started, I didn't know who I liked the most and couldn't recognize my true feelings.

In the meantime, I acted like everything was fine... I'm pathetic.

Timidly, I look at Koigasaki's face. After Koigasaki looked at me, I looked down, and there was a long period of thoughtful silence.

Eventually, I slowly rise my head.

Her face... Why?

It looked like she had a terribly pained expression.

"I'm sorry... I can't go out with you..."

I for a moment did not process what she was saying, and I became unable to say anything back.

"I-I appreciate the gesture, but... I... Don't like you in a romantic way. I can't... See you as anything but a friend..."

Without looking me in the eye, Koigasaki declared such.

"..."

I went completely pale.

Koigasaki's line played over so many times in my mind.

I can't go out with you.

I don't like you.

She, just now, clearly said this.

She brilliantly, resolutely rejected me in an instant. I took a big shock and at the same time was intensely confused.

I mean... Then, what was with that radio recording?

"A-ah, well... Maybe, if Azuki-chan... Told you anything, then... That was, um, a misunderstanding..."

"... Eh?"

"Aah... S-sure, for a moment, I thought you... Could be a good catch, but that was just a simple trick of the mind... Anyway, the one I really do like is... As you know, Suzuki-kun. Back then and now... That hasn't changed."

"..."

No words came to me. *What... Is she saying...?*

Somehow, it looks like I have had some terrible misconception. Koigasaki's liking me was just a momentary trick of the imagination. The one she really does like is Suzuki, even now... That is how Koigasaki feels now.

So, that was just a misunderstanding we had about that broadcast, and I got carried away with it... I was so stupid, I could laugh. I felt like I wanted to weep,

but no tears came forth.

Koigasaki, looking uncomfortable, looks at me. Like she didn't know what to say. It became painful to be there with Koigasaki that I wanted to be able to disappear from the scene. Right now, in front of her, I want to disappear.

"That's how it is, so... I'm sorry."

"..."

Unable to look at Koigasaki, I looked down without saying anything. Like this, I felt like I wanted to run away but that would just be too uncouth.

"....."

If I don't... say anything... This will be troubling for Koigasaki.

"... U-understood. I-I'm sorry for suddenly saying something so odd... Please forget about it."

After all my thinking... That's what I could say. My voice was shaky, but I was able to say something. After that, I slowly began to move... I turn my back to Koigasaki.

"... Bye..."

I set off a footstep toward the station.

Furthermore, tears are not falling.

It's over. Everything is...

I am ashamed from the bottom of my heart.

That confession... It would have been better if I never tried it.

"Ah, bye..."

I could hear Koigasaki's voice from behind me.

"..."

Hearing her voice, my cheeks grow warm. This is farewell... Now with this, totally... Up to now, our relationship, at last... Is impossible.

In my head, flashbacks of memories of Koigasaki come.

“...Wooooooooooooooooooooaaaahhhhh!”

“...!?”

Even I didn't understand what was going on. From the pit of my stomach, such a scream came out. I turn around to face Koigasaki. Tears poured out as though there was no stopping them. I think I was making an incredibly pitiful face. Koigasaki was also terribly surprised at how I was acting and couldn't say anything.

“I... am not going to give up so easily!”

“...Eh...?”

A farewell to koigasaki? I won't... Talk like that ever again! Finally, after I come to know how I feel. After I know who is the most important to me.

No. I definitely, definitely, definitely cannot let that happen! When Hasegawa rejected me... I didn't feel like this. It was a huge shock, but... I didn't feel like my heart was being ripped to shreds like this. It wasn't an answer I just couldn't accept. While sobbing I grabbed Koigasaki by the shoulders.

“I... Like you...! That's not just me misunderstanding that you like me!... It's not something as simple as that!”

“... Ka-Kashiwada...”

“Since I realized how I feel... I can no longer think about anything aside from going out with you... That you would be taken by anyone else... I definitely cannot accept it!”

“...”

“More than anyone... I like you! If it's not you then I can't accept it!”

Together with the tears, the cries from my heart... Poured out one after the other. Desperately, pathetically, and shamefully, I confessed my love.

“Ka-Kashiwada... It hurts, please let go...”

“...!”

At her saying that... I realized that I was holding Koigasaki's shoulders with great force. In a hot haste, I let go. Koigasaki has had a rather troubled face and

doesn't move to look at me. I could tell her attitude was one of total rejection.

"... G-glad to hear it, but... My emotions are still the same, so..."

Koigasaki looked down and told me this in a low voice.

Her words pierce my heart. I fall into despair.

No matter what I do... It's no use, eh...

No matter what I thought... It was love only one way after all...

Koigasaki turned her back to me and ran away to her house. After being left behind, due to shock... I stood there stock still for a long time. I kept my voice low and continued to cry.

No matter how strongly I feel, no matter how large a voice I complain with, no matter how much I cry... The world is not ending. Her feelings... Are not meant for me. Such a clear thing, though understood by my mind, could not be understood by my heart.

In the course of a single day, I went through two painful rejections.

Aah, it was like this... Now, the results of my fortune abruptly go through my head.

Eventually the tears stop and are dried by the cold wind. Now I just want to disappear and die.

That's how I was thinking.

Chapter 7

“Hey, Kashiwada, are you reading another weird manga~?”

January will soon end.

Since that day... Nearly a month has passed. Today during break time, I again read manga without talking to anyone. I cover it with a book over just so that the teacher doesn't notice; I have no intention of hiding it among my peers.

“I bet it's another erotic one, right~!?”

Against what the one messing with me, Kiritani, is saying, there's no way I'd read erotic stuff in school... I think in my inner heart. Well, it's not like the ordinary, normal Kiritani is saying this for no reason. What I'm reading now is a rom-com shounen with a lot of erotic scenes.

“I guess you're still an otaku, like always.”

Otaku. Kiritani's words elicit a little bit of a response from me. But, I didn't care too much and I continued reading.

“You're like a different person from back then; I guess after being dumped it made you run back full-force to being an otaku. You can't find a new girlfriend like this.”

Kiritani seems to think that when I said my girlfriend and I broke up. That it meant she dumped me. Well, it'd be a hassle to convince him otherwise so I just left it at that.

Like Kiritani says, my hair is wild, and my eyebrows are also growing out of control... But, so what? What's the issue with it? Is it a bother to others?

Furthermore, you can call me an otaku all you want, I'm not trying to hide it at school. I mean, there's no reason to hide it anymore. There's no reason to try to be fashionable.

I don't care what others think of me anymore. Lame? Creepy? Otaku? Say whatever you want. It won't bother me no matter what you think.

Since then... I haven't spoken at all to Koigasaki or Azuki-chan. They've

returned to being like total strangers.

Naturally, I couldn't get a new girlfriend. I haven't really spoken to any girls like that.

"Kashiwada, what kind of manga are you reading?"

"...!?"

Suddenly, my manga was taken from my hands. The one who took it was a gal-seeming girl, Sasagawa.

(TL note: a gal is someone who takes to a form of street fashion and is characterized by dyed hair, tanned skin, heavy makeup, and flashy accessories. They are often depicted as being "loose" and not mindful of tradition, yet often popular)

"Ugh, is this erotic manga? You're quite hardcore."

"Huh!? Seriously!? Reading that type of stuff at school!? Too creepy~!"

Soon, my manga was being passed around among a group of gals. They make fun of me and guffaw and laugh at the indecency.

"Give that back."

Without getting too flustered, I told them this calmly.

"..."

When the gals looked at how dull I was being at these antics, they returned the manga to my desk.

"How boring~ What's with that reaction."

"With such little reaction, isn't it a bit scary? He's seems really sick nowadays, I think."

"His eyes always seem so dead."

They were whispering such a conversation, but they didn't really keep their voice down and I could perfectly hear what they were saying. Like this, though I can occasionally speak with girls...

They just make fun of me or get creeped out. Before, I might have gotten

angry and then depressed, but now those types of feelings don't come out from me.

I've come to a kind of enlightenment. People will say I'm dead inside or such, but how I am now is optimal. Getting hurt, becoming sad, caring about how others see you, becoming desperate so that you are not hated...

I was able to escape all this world's painful and tough things. There's nothing like like this... Now, I won't get hurt by liking someone, so that's good. There was a time when I thought those days were fun.

There was a time when I became like a normal person. However... That was the only time I thought I got close to being a normal person after all. That was just an illusion.

Ultimately, the reason I had become like that was due to the cooperative agreement I had made with Koigasaki Momo, not because of my own ability. The way I was able to meet a bunch of girls and have those fun times is all because of Koigasaki.

There's no girl who would approach such a lame, creepy otaku as the current me with my fated link with Koigasaki severed. At this rate, I'm just an unattractive student whose high school life is finished.

Hey, what is there to be pessimistic about? This is what I had hoped for. I've been set free from the suffering. I'm in a state of nothingness. A world where I am free from troublesome things. Isn't it a wonderful world?

Why did I not realize that such a great world existed sooner? I would always be troubled by such unimportant things, sometimes I would even cry... I've learned from such a bitter experience as those days.

That romance and love stuff was because I was mentally weak. After all, I wasn't suited for it. I've given that stuff up completely, of course it's more fun to spend my time and money on my otaku interests.

After all, that stuff won't betray me. If I put in my money and enthusiasm, it's assured I'll get that much enjoyment out of it.

Of course, there were some... No, many fun... Things we did...

“Kashiwada-kun”

“...!”

I soon realized that Hasegawa was near my desk.

“Thanks for your time. Thanks to you, Kashiwada-kun, I was able to speak with big brother without too much nervousness.”

“A-ah... Well...”

The other day, Hasegawa, her brother Yamamoto-san, and I ate together. We were finally able to make what Hasegawa had asked for earlier a reality. That day, Hasegawa and Yamamoto-san were able to both tell each other about what they had been doing, with Hasegawa talking about school and Yamamoto-san and I talking about work.

I talked about how I got into otaku-related things; we were able to have a good time. The three of us all felt a bit nervous at first, but we all got used to each other pretty quickly.

“If it’s OK with you, Kashiwada-kun... It would sure make me glad if we could go out again like that.”

“A-ah... Of course! If you want me to go with you, just ask anytime! It was fun for me as well!”

On the day of the entrance ceremony... Hasegawa accepted my request that we get along as friends again, since then, we’ve truly, truly built up a good relationship as mutual friends. This made me very glad.

“By the way, Kashiwada-kun...”

“...!?”

In the next instant, suddenly... Hasegawa took the manga from my hands.

Due to how abrupt this was, for a moment I didn’t understand what was going on.

Why is Hasegawa doing the same thing as those gals!? Hasegawa flipped and looked through the manga.

I was so dumbfounded by her doing this that I couldn’t even resist.

"Sure enough, it's manga and with such indecent contents to be reading so boldly at school..."

"Eh, ah..."

"Kashiwada-kun, you've got quite the nerve, don't you?"

"...!?"

Hasegawa, with a terribly shocked face, looked at me and spit out such fierce words my way. At her words, I was surprised and not able to say anything.

... Yes, recently, Hasegawa has been like this a lot more. By "like this", I mean that she has not been like that docile, only super kind angel she was like before... Hasegawa has gotten her attitude a bit closer to her best friend, Sonoda Rio-san, to where she has a merciless wicked tongue; it's an intense attitude she has.

"If a female classmate was to see this... A normal person would feel embarrassment and shame if they were carrying this around, but did you lose the ability to feel these at some point or something?"

"...S-sorry...."

Why I was apologizing was something even I didn't fully understand but in this situation I could find no way to struggle through this aside from apologizing.

"Anyways, I will be confiscating this, as the class representative."

"Eeh!? Seriously!? No way!"

"Of course. This is a clear violation of school rules."

With a resolute attitude, Hasegawa confiscated the manga from me.

I took great shock from this development... Yet for some reason, in a way, I have realized this makes me glad.

No, of course I'm not some big masochist who is happy to be insulted and then have his manga taken away. What makes me glad about this is that this attitude means Hasegawa is growing closer to me.

Up to now, Hasegawa had been exceedingly kind, but... That meant that she hadn't truly opened her heart to me. Now, like her best friend Sonoda Rio-san,

she has a fierce personality with a wicked tongue, and her showing me this... Means that more than before, we are closer to each others' true selves. That makes me honestly happy.

Hey, wait a second... I've become enlightened to the fact that getting involved with women brings happiness but also sorrow, so I've graduated from it...

Why get carelessly happy...?

But, well, Hasegawa and I are totally friends, and mutually don't have romantic feelings for each other, perhaps it is OK to make an exception for her.

Anyways, after *that*

, Hasegawa changed. She's begun to show more of her true self to me, but... There's another big change that has happened to her.

"Midori-chan!"

"...!"

A female classmate called Hasegawa's name.

And, she called her by her first name. Hasegawa and I turn to face the direction of the one who called out. It was a girl situated at the seat diagonally ahead of me who was talking with another girl. From her bag she grabbed some sort of DVD.

"This was super funny~!"

"Eh, re-really...!? You watched it?"

Hasegawa's eyes were shining as she spoke.

"Oh, Kashiwada-kun. Then, I'll be on my way."

"...Eh?!"

Hasegawa heartlessly, easily informed me of that fact and left me alone to go to seat with the other girls.

"But, Midori-chan, you liking that type of stuff is super surprising~!"

"I have other recordings at my house so... If you'd want, I could bring them?"

"Really!? I want to see it!"

I listened to the conversation... Anyhow, it appears Hasegawa loaned a DVD of a comedy show.

Yes, Hasegawa has managed to make friends in class aside from me.

"Kashiwada-kun... I from here on out... To not cause you to worry, I'll try my best. That you have others that are important to you yet I cause you worry... To give you a peace of mind, I'll properly... Do my best to make other friends aside from you."

On the day of the opening ceremony, Hasegawa told me such.... Those words seems to have become a reality. Up to now, Hasegawa had wanted friends but her past made her scared to put herself out there; this Hasegawa brought forth her courage and talked to her classmates. She started to work hard at it.

From the start, lots of classmates wanted to get to know Hasegawa better. She had a far-reaching atmosphere of being difficult to approach, though that atmosphere is easily broken through if she herself tries and talks to others.

Now, it seems Koigasaki and Hasegawa get along pretty well. Really, Hasegawa has tried really hard. Someone who faces a challenge without fear deserves respect.

Hasegawa had always wanted friends. Now, she's gaining friends and is probably very happy about it. That is, she gained enough friends to treat me badly and she treats me with a fierce attitude, though the fact that she does this only to me makes me happy myself.

I also think this is a good thing. Seeing her all by herself and lonely was hard to bare. Good for you, Hasegawa.

That comprises a large part of how I feel about this, for sure, but... Why? In my heart... Just a little bit... A feeling of loneliness lies. In that she, who had relied only on me, now relies on other friends... Of course, I understand that that is simply my own selfishness.

Ah, man, I hate this! I'm enlightened, right, enlightened! I don't feel anything, I no longer have those unnecessary emotions!

"Ah, yes, Suzuki."

That day, after school. I was chatting with Suzuki in the classroom.

“Watanabe-san said... If just the two of you isn’t possible, then you could meet her with other people there as well. You could invite me and anyone else you’d want.”

I gave Suzuki the message for my coworker.

“Eeh-!? No way, no way, no way!”

Suzuki makes an openly disgusted face at the name of Watanabe.

“Really, just once, come meet her. At work whenever we look at each other she tells me to give you some messages and it’s annoying.”

“There’s definitely no way... Just seeing Aya-chan’s face... Brings me back to that trauma, it makes my stomach hurt...”

With a despairing face, Suzuki said this to me. Watanabe, Suzuki’s ex-girlfriend from middle school and currently my coworker from my part-time job, still ardently tries to approach Suzuki. It’s a giant annoyance that I’m stuck in.

“Anyway, I was really surprised back then... Just the fact that you had an ex-girlfriend is shocking enough, but to think it was that Watanabe Aya...”

“...Well...”

Maintaining a bitter expression, Suzuki opened his mouth. Up to now, when this topic would come up he’d grow immediately dispirited and wouldn’t say anything, so him saying something surprised me.

“After seeing her in a long time, she had downgraded to a large-breasted loli though...”

“...Huh?”

She had downgraded to a large-breasted loli? Wh-wh-what... is he saying!?

Certainly, Watanabe Aya has a baby face and a small frame yet has large breasts and is a genuinely large-breasted loli, but... “downgraded”, what is this guy saying?! Even knowing that she’s a floozy, that charm is so high-level that you can’t not feel it!

“During middle school her chest was still small so she was a small-breasted

loli, she seemed pure and was super cute... Who would have thought that she was actually an unbelievably loose broad; I didn't realize it at all..."

"Small-breasted loli!? A large-breasted loli is decidedly a much better attribute, no!? Large-breasted lolis are supreme, no!?"

Suzuki looked at me in amazement as I desperately objected.

"Actually... I'm rather indifferent about having this conversation. But, Kasshi-... Are you OK continuing on like this?"

"...!"

I was startled at his words. I... Had spoken to Suzuki about what had happened to me. That I was once again confessed to by my girlfriend that I thought had broken up with me, but because I realized I liked another girl I broke up with her. Then I confessed to that girl. After that, she splendidly rejected me.

However, I didn't tell Suzuki that the girl I liked was Koigasaki. I just came up with a lie that it was someone he didn't know.

Of course. Koigasaki likes Suzuki after all. I definitely wanted to avoid Suzuki becoming self-conscious of me liking Koigasaki so that he would put some distance between Koigasaki and himself.

Suzuki is a good, honest guy so... That continuation is a possibility. Though I may be over-thinking things. Now, Suzuki and Koigasaki are not going out. I can't think the distance between them has shrunk by much.

Suzuki still does not have a girl he is especially close with. If Suzuki and Koigasaki had started going out or something, I am not confident I'd continue talking to him like I am now as a friend.

I don't think I'd be so jealous... That I'd come to hate Suzuki if he'd start dating Koigasaki, but as a human, I don't think I could stay as close as normal to a guy going out with the girl I like.

I didn't have the courage in me to ask how things with Koigasaki were. Koigasaki probably isn't using an aggressive approach to get to Suzuki. Same with Suzuki who probably doesn't view Koigasaki in that way. Though they once

were close enough to go on a date to Harajuku.

“Kasshi... have you completely given up on the one you liked? Directly after getting rejected, you were so depressed it was like she took off on a train the next day to never see you again. Even now, you’re not fully recovered, right? If you like her that much,”

“It’s fine!!”

I said in a loud voice, interrupting him.

Uoaaaaaa, shoot! I’m thinking about needless things again! Enlightenment! The state of nothingness! I have washed my hands of such vulgar things as romance!

“I have... Already forgotten such a thing in the past!”

“A-are you alright? Your eyes are bloodshot...”

“I don’t need women!

I don’t need romance the rest of my life! I will live in my otaku interests!”

As if I was telling myself this, I declared this clearly to Suzuki.

If I can’t be with that person... I don’t need love. That is what I decided... That day when that person rejected me...

“Kasshi-...”

At my saying this, I don’t know if it was out of amazement or what, but... For some reason, his eyes suddenly sparkled.

“I see! That’s right! You don’t want any more of such bitter feelings! Being an otaku is the best! From here on out, let’s be the best otaku we can be together! I also don’t need any girlfriend.

“Thinking of 3-D romance brings only bad feelings! Meeting up again with Aya-chan would only bring back more vivid memories of the past...

That is what I’ve been thinking the most up to now! With my otaku lifestyle and my similar friend Kasshi-... No! With my best friend Kasshi-, I don’t need anything else!”

“...!? A-ah...”

I was a little taken aback at Suzuki's getting so heated up by himself. When did we become best friends.

But still... With just this otaku lifestyle and a similar friend, you don't need anything else... That's right, that's how it is! We don't need chicks! We won't fall in love! In terms of love, as long as there's 2-D that's enough!

So long as you choose the right route, your love comes true 100% of the time... A total love... It's the greatest! Thinking about it, this is the first time I've fully agreed with Suzuki who has given up 3-D love altogether.

"That's right! Otaku is the best! From here on out, I look forward to this life with you, best friend!"

While Suzuki, who was mysteriously tense, was saying this, I grabbed and shook his hand. It's incomprehensible even to me.

"Ka... Kasshi-... I'm glad! You finally agree with me and have given up on 3-D romance and have decided to run to the 2-D world!"

Deeply moved, for some reason Suzuki's cheeks grew red and he firmly shook my hand with both his hands.

"If you agree with me, then come to my house today! We can play games together, right!? My big sister isn't home today so there won't be any interruptions..."

"Eh? A-ah..."

Well, these days... Aren't too bad. I experienced a mixed feeling of happiness and sadness at my friend's words; when I feel so happy it's like I'm in heaven. Then I feel so hurt that I want to die... These days, everyday, I have been too frazzled. No matter how much heart I'd have, it wouldn't be enough.

These days, nothing happens. But, with my otaku hobby and my friends, I am able to feel a meager happiness. That's enough. I'm suited to these days.

Though it has been nearly a month since then, when I think back to that day I want to cry out loud. I became depressed. When I think of it, that's all I can think about. It's so painful I want to die.

So... I'm fed up with all that. I will forget this pain. I'll cover it up to where it's

like it never happened.

My story about the totally otaku high school student Kashiwada Naoki... Ends here. That such a plain otaku as me could experience so much, even now, though it wasn't too crazy, is still unbelievable to me. Though it ends, that was such an incredible time. Though it was only for a short while... I was able to have a normal life. At least, I was able to achieve the goal I had when I entered high school. So, I am satisfied. I will move forward with that.

A lot happened, but I'm sure at some point in the future these memories will all turn to something I'll look back on as fun.

So... I'll keep these bittersweet days of my youth in my heart.

Eventually I will smile looking back at this part of my past, so until then...

{The End}

Well, I wanted to end it there.

But I can't do that.

Since then, it's been about two weeks. A bomb was dropped on me.

"Kashiwada Naoki-sama,

During lunch break I would like to give you something so please come to the roof."

That day, I read the letter placed in my shoe box over again so, so many times.

It was written on cute memo paper in a cute script. No matter how I think about it, a girl wrote this letter.

It doesn't say who sent it. It may have something to do with this, but it is the

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th of February.

Yes, it is Valentine's Day. I had understood that I wouldn't be getting chocolate from anyone today so, keeping calm, I've been thinking about how to pass the time at school today since morning.

The only girl I speak with and can be said to have good relations with is only one girl, Hasegawa Midori... However, there's no guarantee that she would give me obligatory chocolate. Well, she shouldn't be bringing any chocolate or such to school with her being such a rigid member of the student council.

It's a violation of school rules after all. In other words, there is presently no one who would give me chocolate. Even for one who has reached state of nothingness of enlightenment... This brutal truth has me just trying to keep calm this day, hence, I haven't had any confidence.

In the midst of all this, what comes to me but this cute-looking letter as I attend school. On a day like today, the thing she wants to give me... Of course, it's going to be Valentine's day chocolate. If it isn't chocolate like that, I can only imagine this as something done out of spite. Just who wrote this letter...?

Someone I know? Or, could it be a hidden fan of mine?

Now, all day, even though I've reached enlightenment, I still wonder about who sent me such a letter. It makes me feel uneasy and pitiable. In class, the girls gave out their chocolates (of course, I didn't receive any), and in the hallway, couples would exchange their chocolates and flirt, while Suzuki came in and said, "Chocolate for my friend! I made some~!", and gave me some. I waited and waited for lunch break to roll around.

I quickly, well, actually it was more of a half-run, went up the stairs to the roof.

The roof, eh, how nostalgic. Lots of stuff happened on the roof. I spoke a lot with Koigasaki and Azuki-chan on the roof.. Oh no, that's bad, any more of this and I'll get sentimental. What would I do if I got all gloomy while on my way to get chocolate from a girl?

I reach the roof and open the door. There, a single girl was waiting for me. Seeing her, I...

"..!? A-A... Azuki-chan...?!"

I unsteadily pulled back. That's how surprised I was.

My ex-girlfriend... Sakurai Azuki was there.

Azuki-chan had her arms crossed in an imposing stance and looked to be sulking at me.

Wh-why... Azuki-chan...!?

Azuki-chan is giving me chocolate...!? No, no way, that can't be. There's definitely no way that that is what is the case. There is some misunderstanding!

That's because... Naturally, ever since the day of the opening ceremony... She has been avoiding me and has continued to ignore me. When we first met, she avoided me in a non-serious manner, but this is not something so light-hearted as that.

This attitude was thorough. If we'd meet in the hallway, she definitely would not look me in the eyes. No matter how I'd look at her, she wouldn't look at me even a bit.

One time, it seemed as though she felt she was being too harsh that she unconsciously almost spoke to me but... When she realized it, she still just ignored me. She treated me like I didn't exist.

That hurt. Those events are a part of what made me reach enlightenment.

Azuki-chan, with a stern expression, not saying anything... Suddenly tossed something to me.

“Wha!?”

In a hot haste, I catch what she threw to me. It was a small box.

“...? U-uh... This is...”

Timidly, I ask her this question.

“Please open it and look inside.”

Azuki-chan spoke to me in a snappy voice.

We've exchanged words for the first time in a month, eh... I was thinking about how I didn't want to not talk with her again...

Formal speech, eh...

Well, I guess it figures...

“Ah, yes...”

Without really understanding anything, I opened the box like this.

“Eh...”

Inside, I thought it was probably homemade, but there was a heart-shaped chocolate cake. In an interesting font, in big letters was written the word “obligatory”, and if that wasn’t there... I surely would have been glad.

“This is chocolate for Valentine’s Day. *Obligatory* chocolate.”

She put a strange emphasis on the word “obligatory”.

“Eh... You don’t need to put so much emphasis on the word obligatory...”

Even so, I was happy. I was able to speak with her after a month. Though it’s obligatory, Azuki-chan gave me chocolate and, homemade chocolate at that...

Hm? Wait, homemade...? A homemade chocolate cake by Azuki-chan, who was really bad at cooking (especially at making sweets)...!?

Ugh, h-how frightening...! ... No! I’m happy that she made this for me, so much so that I can’t think of anything else...

“Kashiwada-kun, I’m believe that you shouldn’t be getting any chocolate from anyone else.”

While I was so glad, her biting words stabbed through to the heart. Sure, she’s right, but the way she said it was just too much!?

No, more than that... What she called me has returned to what it was...

“Kashiwada-kun” is how she is referring to me....

“Ugh... Sure, this is the first chocolate I’ve received from a girl but...”

“Bu!?”

For some reason Azuki-chan interjected my words during my pitiable line.

“From a girl...!? Why must your words be so suggestive...”

“...Eh? Did I say something wrong?”

“Ahem, n-no... Nothing is wrong!”

Azuki-chan holds her tongue and at once clears her throat and gives me a cold look.

"...No, I really can't believe it. That you, Kashiwada-kun, and I went out."

At such harsh words stated so indifferently, my heart was already on the verge of breaking.

"Eh? A...aha..."

I was already only able to return a bitter smile.

"Why did I like you I wonder... Thinking about it now, I don't understand it at all."

"S-so cruel!"

Without thinking, what I thought in my heart came out loud. Even if it's true, is that something to say right in front of whom it is about!? Azuki-chan... When did you become so cold...? I already want to cry.

This is why I don't have interest in girls anymore... Seeing this attitude, it's more like she's disgusted with me. Without the occasion of being in love's madness, looking at me now, it's like she can't see or feel any bit of charm in me... Is that where she is now...

"With that,"

Azuki-chan slips right past me, as I stood there holding back tears. Like this, she would leave the roof. So she called me out to the roof to give me obligatory chocolate and tell me rather nasty things.

I had held a momentary expectation that maybe she had wanted to return to being friends due to the circumstances surrounding her calling me out here, but... She definitely does not intend that.

Perhaps she called me out here to tell me she no longer likes me and she makes that clear with her attitude toward me. Well, even so, her talking to me after so long and giving me chocolate, even if it is obligatory, makes me genuinely happy.

"Ah, yeah."

Suddenly, she stops, turns around, and looks at me. Hm? Does she have another mean thing to....

“Momo-chan is keeping a tight lip about this, but...”

“Momo-chan, during spring break... Looks like she’ll be transferring to a different school. For her father’s work. It looks like she’s moving.”

“...Eh?”

My thoughts stop for an instant.

Koigasaki is...transferring to a different school? Moving...? What's up with that?... I... Didn't have any idea about this... Where is she moving? Is it close enough to where we can still meet easily?

Wait, what am I thinking? While I'm in the same class as Koigasaki, I don't talk with her at all. Whether she's near or far, we don't have a real relationship anymore. My head understands this... But my heart is still very distraught.

Spring break... So, in about a month she'll no longer be at this school...

“So, if you have anything you want to tell Momo-chan, you don’t have any more time. You... Don’t think that leaving things as they are is good, right?”

“...Eh...”

Azuki-chan, with a serious expression, looked me in the eyes.

Azuki-chan... Could it be that in order to tell me this, you went out of your way...?

Even though it's normal for you to detest and resent me...

Yet even now... You were thinking about me and for my sake...?

“Please do keep it a secret from Momo-chan that I told you this. Bye.”

“...!”

Azuki-chan said such words curtly, and once again turned her back to me. She said that Koigasaki was keeping a tight lip about it, yet she told me...

Suddenly, a thought came to mind, and right there, I took a bite out of Azuki-chan’s chocolate cake.

“...!?”

I was shocked at the taste. I can't believe it. *Could it be like that?*

“Azuki-chan!”

This time I spoke up to Azuki-chan, whose back was facing me as she moved to get down from the roof. Azuki-chan turned around at my call, and upon looking at me, she was a little shocked.

“I can't believe it... This is really good! At some point... You must've gotten pretty good at cooking...”

Yes... Azuki-chan's homemade chocolate cake of hers that I ate was... Surprisingly delicious. That hard pound cake of hers that I ate before doesn't even compare.

The cake is soft and the taste has just the right amount of sweetness to be delicious. Azuki-chan made a face that was a little surprised at my words and then

“...That's”

A heartrending smile appeared on her face...

“Because I... practiced a lot.”

“...Eh...?”

In her eyes... Although just a little, a tear came out. Perhaps she realized this, but she then suddenly in a hot haste turned around and ran out. I... Didn't chase after her.

“It's not like it's particularly disgusting. If you work at it I'm sure it can be made pretty good... I'll be waiting patiently until I can eat your delicious sweets.”

“Ka-Kashiwada-kun...! Thank you so much! I'll work hard at it!”

That conversation from when we were going out run about in my head. Her homemade Madeleine cake was hard and did not taste good, but she was proactive and said she'd work hard at it.

Since then, Azuki-chan has been practicing making sweets, eh... To become so

good at it...

Memories of when we were dating come back to my mind one after the other. Before I realize it... While I eat Azuki-chan's homemade chocolate cake, I think about her and tears finally pour out from my eyes.

"You don't think that leaving things as they are is good, right?"

Azuki-chan's voice continues to reverberate in my head.

—Koigasaki will stop being here.

But... Just what was she telling me to do? I was already rejected very harshly. In a resolute way I couldn't come back from. Even now, while we're in the same class, we haven't said a word to each other, and we both don't look each other in the eye. Whether she's close or far away, the results are the same. Right now, there's nothing I can do. In addition, I've already decided that I don't want to get hurt like that again.

However.

Just what kind of feelings did Azuki-chan have when she told me that?

One who should detest and resent me... Is supporting me. Azuki-chan, like me... Should be hurt by love. Despite this, did she say that for my sake, thinking of my happiness? Yet despite that, I am doing nothing but running in circles? Will I ignore her long-awaited feelings?

This bomb she's dropped on me is very powerful. At this point... There's no way I can "do nothing and run in circles away from reality" with the current situation.

Azuki-chan has given me... A last bit of courage. The courage to face what I must, despite knowing that I can get hurt...

After school.

I resolve myself and call out to stop her as she moves to leave the classroom.

"... Koigasaki"

Turning around and seeing my face, she was so surprised she couldn't say anything.

"...!? Wh-what...!?"

With what I feel seemed like her being frightened at something, Koigasaki responded with that.

"Ah, eh, well..."

After so long, being in front of her, I surprised even myself with how nervous I was that I couldn't come up with something to say. Vividly remembering how she flatly rejected me... I want to run away.

No, I can't run... Then what will be of the courage I worked up to speak to her?

"Ummm... Are you... Transferring?"

"...!"

Koigasaki looked surprised at my words.

"... A-Azuki-chan, huh..."

She whispered something under her breath in a low voice. Then she sighed largely, and spoke without looking at my face.

"Y-yeah, but... What about it!?"

"Eh, what about it you say... I-I... Didn't know about it..."

I wanted to say something about it.. Is what I thought, then I thoughtlessly blurted out what I said, and regretted it. Koigasaki and I no longer have a relationship— it's not like we are mutual friends. There's absolutely no obligation for me to say anything about it.

Yet, I imprudently...

"..."

Koigasaki looked down, not saying a word, thinking about something. Then she looked up and say,

"W-we have no relationship at all!"

Koigasaki's words shot through my chest. We have no relationship... No relationship... These words whirl around in my mind.

It would have been better had I not spoken to her... That regret pushed upon

me. This really wasn't a good thing. If I'm just going to get hurt again like this, it would have been better had I just closed myself in my shell...

"With that..."

Koigasaki said such to the absent-minded and quiet me, then quickly moved to leave.

Is this... Koigasaki and my... Last conversation...?

Even though after she transfers, we might not be able to meet again...

Will I ever speak with Koigasaki again...?

I... Hate that! Definitely!

I had been thinking that nothing would change compared to how it had been... But that's wrong. Up to now, after getting rejected by Koigasaki, I've been watching her in the classroom every day. Not so much as to get close to talking with her but just watching her.

But, if she transfers, I won't be able to do that anymore. I had hoped in secret that one day we could return to being friends, but if she's not here anymore, that's definitely impossible. That possibility will get cut off.

Right here, right now, if I don't try something...!

"Koigasaki...!"

With the last of my power, I called and stopped Koigasaki. Koigasaki, who had moved to leave me, stopped for a moment.

"The week after next, Tuesday... The 28th, are you free!?"

"...!"

Koigasaki reacted with surprise at my words.

"After school ends..."

"Ah... I don't have free time."

Without any hesitation, she responds with a refusal. I am hurt very much again by those words. Koigasaki is this obstinate in rejecting me...

She already knows of my feelings. On top of that, she is now refusing this

proposal... Her attitude shows an absolute rejection of me.

I already told you I don't like you, right? Why are you so persistent at trying to approach me like that? You're a bother.

It's like that's what she is telling me. Even I am shocked. After she so thoroughly rejected me.. Even now I persistently try to talk to her and try my luck at inviting her on a date... Even though I'm nothing but a bother to Koigasaki. Now, so hurt, I can't get any words out of my mouth and stay there silent. Paying no mind to me, Koigasaki leaves from my side.

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"Ah, the same one again! Really~ how many of this one do you think I have~ I don't have a taste for collecting an infinite amount of you—"

I quietly watch Suzuki complain to a capsule toy machine in the corner of an appliance shop. We came to Akihabara on our way home from school.

"You aren't going to try the capsule toy machine, Kasshi-?"

"Eh... N-no..."

We talk as we leave the corner and make our way to the exit of the shop. Suzuki was having a little trouble holding up the paper bag with so much chocolate, as a lot of girls gave him chocolate today. Due to how much it irritated me, I decided in my heart that I would not help him carry it.

"Hey, Kasshi-, are you feeling weird? Your face is pale..."

"Eh, n-not really..."

I said such without being able to stop thinking about what happened after school today. I had thought I could finally speak with Koigasaki after about a month, however, she just rejected me harshly again. I'm beyond being shocked and can only laugh at it.

"Did something happen?"

Suzuki strangely peered at my face.

"... A-actually... That earlier girl I liked, I asked her on a date... and got rejected."

I didn't have enough confidence to deceive him, so I told him the truth.

"... Eh!? Seriously? Didn't you decide to give up on that and to live in the 2-D world!?"

"Th-that's what it was supposed to be like but... Circumstances changed I suppose..."

Ultimately, I wasn't able to be free from the 3-D world like Suzuki.

"You weren't able to give it up... Is she that attractive?"

"Eh? Y-yeah... I guess..."

Why... Do I hold to such a harsh unrequited love, not giving up on Koigasaki? When the same thing happened with Hasegawa, I grew depressed, but I was able to give up on it

(though that was in large part thanks to Azuki-chan).

"Is this girl you like an older woman with large breasts?"

"Eh? No, not at all!"

I immediately answer in the negative to Suzuki's words.

"Actually, she's the opposite of my type. She's not older than me and she doesn't have large breasts, she's short and has small breasts... Her character too is completely not my type: she's not like a calm adult but noisy and loud.

She's quick to be mean, high-handed and to be selfish as well as get angry. In terms of hair and fashion, I like black, neat hair, but she has curly brown hair and wears her make-up thick and wears flashy clothes. Beyond that, she has a cartoon-like mind like a character from a m a shoujo manga tries less to keep in the newest fashions (lol)..."

As I said such, I grew surprised. *That's right...*

Koigasaki is truly, truly the opposite of my type.

"Wait... Kasshi-, do you really like her? You're really dissing her."

Suzuki asked me this while surprised.

"Eh? A-ah..."

"Then, just what do you like about her?"

"Eh?!"

What I like about Koigasaki...?

"What I like about her, eh... Let's see... Against her appearance, on the inside she's not very serious but pure, I guess... When I'm in trouble she offers a helping hand, when I'm down she encourages me, and she's nice I suppose..."

Though she always shows off as proud, she really is a crybaby. Instead of herself she is always thinking of others. When I see her crying face, I feel like running away... I'd always want to help her. I'd want to protect her. Even being rejected... I still... Like Koigasaki. I love her more than anyone.

"And, there's also her face. Though she may not be my type she is unbelievably pretty and cute."

"...Hey, Kasshi-..."

Suzuki furrows his brow and looks at me.

"Isn't this person you like... Koigasaki-san?"

"...!?"

He found oooouuuut!!

"Wh-why!?"

"Ah, so it is. I mean, everything you just said perfectly describes Koigasaki-san."

"...! G-gh..."

Surely, that's true... Am I stupid or what!?

"But how awful, saying it was someone I didn't know, you've been lying this whole time."

"... S-sorry..."

"Why did you hide it?"

"... N-no... Well... You and Koigasaki had a good feeling between you two... I didn't want myself to get in the way of that..."

"Eh, a good feeling between Koigasaki and I? No, no, that's not true~"

Suzuki's frivolous laughter and denial truly is a pity for Koigasaki.

I see, even now... Koigasaki's feelings are still one-sided.

"No, but... Last year during the culture festival you seemed to get along pretty well. Then after that, you two went on a date..."

"Eh? Date... Koigasaki and I? What's that? That never happened?"

Suzuki said with an expression that he felt something was strange from the bottom of his heart.

"No, you said so yourself! That you went shopping with Koigasaki in Harajuku..."

Why do I remember, yet you forgot it? Was that something Suzuki would forget so easily!?

Suzuki thought for awhile and then...

"A-ah! That! That wasn't a date at all or anything!"

No, to you it might have been like that, but to Koigasaki it was a genuine date...

"I mean, it was my sister, Koigasaki, and I , all three of us that went after all?"

"... Huh!?"

I exclaimed in a loud voice to what Suzuki had said.

"And, we were only together to shop. Afterwards it looks like those two went playing in Harajuku together. Originally Koigasaki and my sister had made a promise to the go to the Q Pot Café in Omotesando (TL note: a place in Harajuku), and on that day my sister asked me, 'Do you want to come, Sou-chan,' and I thought I wanted to go buy some clothes in Harajuku~, so I went. I went home right after I finished shopping. Wait, Kasshi-, I didn't tell you all that already?"

"Eeeh!? No, you didn't tell me! This is the first I hear of it!"

"No, I definitely told you! Ah, but when I told you, you were a little down and it felt like you were only half listening..."

“E-eh...”

It wasn't a date...

“Since then, I haven't done anything with Koigasaki.”

“...”

Suzuki and Koigasaki hadn't made any progress. That they went on a date was a misunderstanding, And he says they haven't done anything together lately.

Thank God...

To be honest, that makes me happy.

But... Then I think. *So what?*

I mean, this doesn't at all change the fact that Koigasaki likes Suzuki, this doesn't change the fact that Koigasaki rejected me. This doesn't change the fact that she continues to reject me.

“Actually, I thought that it was you and Koigasaki-san that went good together.”

I was bewildered at Suzuki's words.

“Eh... M-me and Koigasaki!? W-why...”

“I mean, since earlier you two got along, and when we went to Harajuku, she was super-seriously trying to pick out a good birthday present for you.”

Koigasaki was that serious about picking out a birthday present for me...?

“So when I heard that you got a girlfriend, I thought for sure that it was Koigasaki-san, and when it turned out to be a different girl, I was shocked.”

“...”

“I kinda find it hard to believe that you got rejected by Koigasaki-san... With how good you two got along, it looked like mutual love to me.”

“Nah... It wasn't anything like that...”

“Was there some sort of circumstance that makes her unable to date anyone now?”

“Eh...”

Circumstance that makes her unable to date...?

At that moment, a thought popped into my mind. That Koigasaki is transferring to a different school. We'd soon be separated so we wouldn't be able to go out...

There's also the whole thing with Azuki-chan. She's one to think about her friends. If she thinks about Azuki-chan, then she wouldn't be able to go out with me...

No, I'm thinking I'm better than I am... That she simply really doesn't like me as a member of the opposite sex is absolutely more likely, I think.

No... However...

That day, I sent Koigasaki one message. I truly think it would be bad if I were to give up. This is my last vain struggle to this end.

“No matter what, I want to speak with you. On the 28th, I’ll be waiting at the Akihabara Electric Town Exit. If you have plans, I don’t mind changing when we can meet. If you don’t want to come... Then you don’t have to come. But, I’ll be waiting there the whole time.”

I wasn’t expecting a response, but one came surprisingly quickly.

“I won’t go. Really, just give it up.”

Truly, truly this is... The last attempt. If this turns out badly, I'll take it like a man... And give it up. Even if it hurts, even if I'm lonely, that's what I must do.

Chapter 8

February 28th.

Following what I said in the message I sent to Koigasaki, I go to the Akihabara Electric Town Exit after school. Of course, since that message we haven't sent any more messages to each other and we haven't talked to each other or anything like that.

The probability of her coming here is... Let's see, a 1% chance... No, it might be even less than that. But, that's fine.

That's because I'm doing this so I can give up on Koigasaki.

I have my iPod earphones in my ears and lean against the wall.

I will, right here, today... Give up on Koigasaki. At the same time, I secretly have hope in the less than 1% chance.....

Doing this, I recall the first time I came to Akihabara with Koigasaki. That was quite the incident, all she did was complain and halfway through, she started feeling bad...

The next time we come to Akihabara was with Azuki-chan, all three of us went maid cafe hopping. Then, we went to the cosplay shop, and Koigasaki even tried on some outfits.

Ah... Like today, when I go somewhere like this, I would end up thinking of Koigasaki. Whether I'd go to Harajuku or Ikebukuro or the summer comiket...

Then after this... It will probably be the same. Even though after this, Koigasaki will be transferring... I won't be able to meet her again.

After that, a long time passed.

One hour, two hours...

... Sure enough, it's no use... Eh.

Well, the original intent was for it to be of no use though...

However, now, like this, it hurts more than I thought it would... I had gotten my hopes up. That Koigasaki would come... Really, I was so stupid...

“...Eh?”

The next moment, I doubted my own eyes. From the ticket gate, a familiar figure came closer to me. This can't be... Surely, I'm mistaken. No, but... There's no way I'd mistake someone else for her.

“You're still here?”

Koigasaki, without a hint of timidity... Shockingly spoke first to me.

“I thought that you wouldn't be here by now and came here, yet you were still here...”

“H-Hey you...! Is that something to say to the one you made wait for an awfully long time!?”

“... I said that I wouldn't come here.”

Koigasaki looked a little to the side and whispered.

“...But, you came...”

She came. And just with that... I am incredibly happy.

Even though I thought she definitely wouldn't come...

“So, what is it? What do you want?”

“Eh?! A-ah... There's a... Place I want you to come with me for a bit.”

“I see... Then, let's quickly go there.”

Koigasaki started walking briskly.

I scrambled to follow after her. Looking at her from behind, I must desperately hold myself back for if I let my guard down I will grow desirous.

“So, where do you want to go?”

“A-ah... Toranoana...”

As if nothing happened, we were able to talk to each other. That we can speak normally like this after not talking for so long and after that stuff happened surprises even me.

“Is there a place you wanna go to? You came all the way to Akiba after all.”

“Eh, a place I want to go to? Ah... I want to go to the Vocaloid CD corner I suppose.”

“Vocaloid CD...?”

“Yeah, you can listen to them fine on Nico Nico Douga, but lots of people prefer the CD. Speaking of it, is there a place they sell that here in Akiba?”

“A-ah... Let’s go someplace where they sell it!”

Koigasaki having a place she wanted to go makes me a little glad, I guide her to the CD department of Toranoana.

“Uaah~ there’s so many!? Ah, this is one of my favorites, P’s songs!”

I see Koigasaki having fun looking at the CD department, I think. The day we first came to Akihabara... I couldn’t think that she’d become this much of an otaku. Of course, she’s still not on the level of a serious otaku, but she’s cosplayed, has purchased doujinshi of works she likes, and has even joined a circle to sell their own doujinshi... Without a doubt, she can be properly called an otaku.

After a bit of time of having fun looking in the CD department, it was now my turn to go where I want to go. Where I wanted to go was... Toranoana’s doujinshi corner.

“Hey... You mean to bring me to the erotic doujinshi corner!?”

“Wrong! It’s the corner for all age groups!”

We go up the stairs and make it to the department with doujinshi for all ages. I move to the original works section of the doujinshi corner.

“What I wanted to buy was this.”

From among what was there, I picked up a book and showed it to Koigasaki.

“Eh... Wait, that’s...!”

Koigasaki was terribly surprised upon seeing the doujinshi. Sure enough, she hadn’t caught on to what I meant to do...

“Now that I think about it, Nikaidou-san did say that Toranoana committed to

sell this, but... To think you can just buy it like you can buy anything normally..."

Yes, what I showed Koigasaki was Murasaki-san's work which was published at the winter comiket and which was a joint doujinshi that had Koigasaki contribute to the rough draft. I haven't gotten a chance to see the real thing yet, as we were in circumstances in which I couldn't ask Koigasaki to let me see it, I had planned to buy it today.

"A-amazing! The book that I helped make the rough draft for is being sold so normally in a shop like this, with other works... I can't believe it! ... I'm so glad..."

Koigasaki seeing the doujinshi she helped make being displayed moved her. It's a good thing I brought her here... I think in my heart of hearts.

"...Wait, you're... Going to buy it? Seriously!?"

"Yeah, a certain someone won't show me the finished product after all. Even though I helped them with it a little bit myself..."

"Wha...!? Ugh... T-true... Sorry about that..."

"I'm interested in what happened with it. Anyway, I'm gonna go buy it."

I left Koigasaki while she looked like she wanted to say something, and brought the doujinshi to the register.

"...Th-thank you..."

After I returned from the register, Koigasaki thanked me a little awkwardly.

After that we moved to a different floor while chatting as we looked at manga and light novels.

"But really... It truly was moving."

After being in the store for a while, while leaving Toranoana, without thinking, I said such.

"Eh, what are you saying so suddenly?"

"Well, it's just... The first time we came to Akihabara together, you seemed really frazzled by it, but now you're acting like it's normal."

"... Well, since then I've come here many times... I've gotten used to it I guess..."

"That you would become this much of an otaku... To be honest, at the beginning I thought it was definitely impossible."

"...!"

Koigasaki was startled at my words.

"I also... To be frank, am shocked that I could become such an otaku."

"How was it?"

"Eh? How was what..."

"How was actually becoming an otaku?"

"... It was fun. I gained new friends, and my world grew so much larger to encompass a lifestyle I had no idea about..."

After entering high school, to become an otaku I did a bunch of stuff... It was all so much fun. I'm glad I could become an otaku."

Koigasaki, who was walking at my side, turned a little to face me, and smiled.

"To you, who has made me into an otaku, I am thankful."

"...! Koigasaki..."

I was surprised at Koigasaki's simple words of appreciation.

"... M-me too. Well, I'm still a far way from being normal... But, for teaching me about that world... Thank you."

I formed an agreement with her, and have struggled to become normal...

There were bitter times as well, but, beyond that... It was all so much fun. At my words, Koigasaki's eyes grew large and she was surprised. Then... Suddenly, she smiles with her mouth closed.

"...You haven't realized it? From the start, you've been especially normal."

"Eh...?"

I... Have been normal? What is she saying? Sure, when I was dating Azuki-chan, I think I was pretty normal, but now... The only girl I can easily speak with is Hasegawa, and the gals in class make fun of me, calling me creepy and an otaku and such...

"Hey, by the way... Right now, where are you going?"

Koigasaki had been quietly accompanying me while I tirelessly walked, but... Sure enough, that seems to have gotten a tad odd.

"Ah... The station?... Perhaps, are you going home?"

That Koigasaki looked a little lonely when saying this... Is probably my being conceited.

"No... There's just one last place to which I want you to come with me."

Koigasaki seemed puzzled at my words.

"Won't you... Come with me? This really is the last favor I ask of you..."

Yes, the last favor I ask of Koigasaki to whom I must say goodbye come spring break. After this, Koigasaki, a little surprised, was quiet for a bit.

"...Understood."

Is how she responded.

*

We traveled by train to Suidobashi station, two stops away. It is already passed 7 pm. It seems Koigasaki already told her parents she would be late over the phone.

"Hey, could it be that the place you want to go is..."

"Ah..."

After coming this far, Koigasaki is starting to suspect about where we are headed. I am trying to go to Tokyo Dome City. The place where Koigasaki, Koigasaki's little sister Yuzu-chan, and I made memories of going to play in September of last year.

Koigasaki doesn't say anything. Though I had prepared for her to say she didn't want to go... She just quietly walked by my side.

"Ah, this"

Before long, we arrive at Tokyo Dome City, and I give Koigasaki her ticket I had bought in advance.

“Eh...!? This... What, you had already bought this!?”

While the probability of Koigasaki not coming was high, I still decided to make a bit of a bet by buying these tickets.

“Ah, well...”

While surprised, Koigasaki accepted the ticket, and then pulled out her wallet from her bag.

“Eh?! Oh, it’s fine... I went out and bought them on my own, and I’m the one bringing you here against your wanting to not come with me.”

“No, it’s not like that!”

“And when we came here before, you were the one being very generous.”

“Kashiwada...”

Well, more than Koigasaki, it was her parents that were generous.

At my words, Koigasaki gave her thanks and reluctantly put her wallet back into her purse. When we went on that mock date in Harajuku, she told me to pay and be generous on dates so conceited-like, yet look how she acts when I try to do exactly that. Far be it from me to think that she only meant that that is what is popular and that she obviously would pay herself.

What I bought were evening tickets to ride 3 attractions after 5 pm. I figured we wouldn’t have much time and chose these tickets.

“What do you want to ride? I’m fine with whatever, so choose what you want.”

Well, I’d be done for if she were to say she didn’t want to ride anything with me... While I think this in my heart, I timidly look at Koigasaki’s face. At my words, Koigasaki was, surprisingly enough, smiling.

“Eh?! Really? Then...”

... So.

Sure, I did say that I’d be fine with anything, but...

I quickly came to regret what I had said. Koigasaki said she wanted to ride in the coffee cups, and getting on that ride is fine, but...

“Wait... sto... stop spinning~”

“Gahahahahahaha!”

The cups spun much more than Koigasaki could believe. With such thin arms, where did she gain so much strength?

“Haah... haah...”

At length the attraction’s run time ends, and we get off the ride on unsteady feet.

“Ahahahahaha hahahaha! Really, you scream so much!”

Looking at me, Koigasaki erupted in laughter.

“You feel fine just like this...?”

“Hey, next, next we should ride that!”

“Eh!?”

Let me rest up a little bit... Without a break, Koigasaki took off as fast as she could. Without a choice, I hurriedly ran after her.

“Eh... Th-this...”

But, upon seeing the attraction in front of my eyes, I became thoughtlessly speechless.

“A haunted... House...?!”

Of all things, the thing I am the worst at!

“... A-another one doesn’t catch your eye...?”

“Eh, what, don’t tell me you’re bad at dealing with haunted houses?

“Ugh... We-well...”

“How pitiful~ Hey, earlier you said anything was fine with you.”

“Well that’s true, but... Hey, ah, wait!”

Koigasaki forcibly grabs me by the hand and we go inside the haunted house.

“...”

Wow, ignoring the course of events right now... Koigasaki and I are holding

hands.... Yeah, it's so that we go into the haunted house, but Koigasaki is the one who reached out to grab my hand, right?

My heart starts pounding for a different reason from the fear of the haunted house.

“...! Uguaaaah!?”

But as I was thinking that, such reason for my heart pounding lasted only an instant and I scream at a monster that suddenly appeared as a trap for the haunted house.

“Hey... You really do get scared too easily!”

While Koigasaki didn't show signs of being even a little bothered, she laughed when she saw how shaken I was.

“Oi, d-don't laugh, there's no helping it!? Uuwaaaagh!?”

After this, I continued to scream in such a manner.

“Haah... Haah...”

At last we reach the exit, and I am completely tired out from screaming.

... I notice that at some point Koigasaki and I stopped holding hands.

“To get scared so much...”

From the start, Koigasaki had been laughing at how scared I would get, but now over the amazement of it, she looks at me with a cool eye.

Shoot... It's such an important day, yet I had to show such a pathetic display of myself...

“There's no helping that! That's why I said I was bad at these haunted houses...”

I pathetically wanted to cry.

“... Then, what should we do last?”

At this point, there's no more scary things to worry about. We can ride anything!

“Eh? Ah, hmm...”

At my words, Koigasaki was bewildered for some reason...

“... Over there...”

She pointed in that direction. There was..

“Eh... The Ferris wheel?!”

I was super amazed. When we came to the amusement park before, Koigasaki really did not mesh well with the Ferris wheel.

“Wr-wrong! I mean the attraction over there!”

“A-ah...”

So that's what it was...

The area with the Ferris wheel is a little separated from where we are, so we start walking over there. Eventually we reach the commercial LaQua facility (TL note: LaQua is one of the largest natural hot spring complexes in Tokyo and is located near the “Big O”, which is the world’s first centerless Ferris wheel) adjacent to the Ferris wheel area.

“...!”

“Wow... A-amazing...”

Koigasaki said in a voice of admiration. It spontaneously took my breath away. What unfolded there was a large illumination with beautiful lights being displayed.

In such excitement, Koigasaki took out her smartphone and started filming the illumination. Girls really do like this stuff, huh... But to even a guy like me, this illumination sprawled out across the area was charmingly beautiful.

“So... What do you want to ride?”

“That...”

Koigasaki quickly pointed using her fingers. What she pointed to was... The merry-go-round.

“Eh...!?”

The merry-go-round, the two of us...?

I couldn't hide my surprise at Koigasaki's proposal. The beautifully lit-up merry-go-round was fairy-tale like and very romantic.

"Any attraction is fine, right?"

For some reason, Koigasaki asked me this with an uneasy look.

"... A-ah... I get it..."

Looking at that face, I couldn't turn her down. It was just a little embarrassing, but... The two of us, Koigasaki and I, got on to ride the merry-go-round. We both straddle horses next to each other. Soon, the attraction starts to move.

"This is more embarrassing than I thought it would be..."

The real motive behind this leaks out. Why did Koigasaki want to ride this... With me? Usually, you wouldn't want to ride this with someone that is not someone you love, with someone whose favor you think of as a bother, right?

"... Because it was my dream..."

As if reading my emotions... Koigasaki said such without any prodding.

"Eh...?"

"Riding this... Was my dream."

With her cheeks blushing as though she was embarrassed... Koigasaki says this while looking in my direction.

Her dream? To ride a merry-go-round? But, when we came here last time, she was riding the merry-go-round with her little sister Yuzu-chan. Then... Just what does she mean...?

At length, the attraction ends and we, in silence get off the attraction. Koigasaki does not move to look at my face. We got off the attraction and started walking when...

"...!?"

Suddenly, music began playing near us, and we were at once shocked. We turn to face to the direction of where the music was coming from. There was a fantastical water fountain show beginning where the music met shining lights.

"... Incredible... Beautiful..."

With an entranced-like expression, Koigasaki let out such words. Good thing it's starting now... Today, when I was looking up the Tokyo Dome City earlier, I found out about this show, and I secretly thought that I wanted to show it to Koigasaki.

At such a gorgeous water fountain show, Koigasaki and I stared in blank amazement.

"Koigasaki..."

"Eh?"

If I'm going to say it, it's now or never.

I call Koigasaki's name. The moment she turned to face me...

"Happy birthday."

I give Koigasaki the birthday present I had prepared for her.

"Eh...!?"

Koigasaki stared at the paper bag I handed to her as if she didn't understand what was going on.

"N-no way...! You knew...!?"

Yes. I knew that today was Koigasaki's birthday, so I invited her on this date to celebrate her birthday. The probability of her not coming out with me on her birthday was very high since she has been avoiding me ever since I confessed to her.

There should be no way that she will spend her birthday with me
... is what I had thought.

But, Koigasaki came.

"Your present... Please accept it."

At my words, still bewildered, Koigasaki took the paper bag from my hands.

"... Th-thank you..."

"Please open it."

"Ah, yes..."

With shaking hands, Koigasaki grabs the present from within the paper bag surrounded with wrapping. Within the wrapping.... Is the silver present I picked out for her. It was decoration shaped like an “M”, the initial of Koigasaki’s first name.

Since I bought a really expensive gift for Azuki-chan last year in December, I was terribly out of money, but with my New Year’s gift and the work I’ve been doing at my part-time job this year, I was somehow able to buy something. I chose it out of my own liking, so I honestly didn’t have much confidence that Koigasaki would like it.

However...

“...!?”

I was surprised at Koigasaki’s reaction. Looking at my gift, Koigasaki was crying. I thought of what I should do if she said it wasn’t her style or that she didn’t like it but...

“Koi... Gasaki...?”

“... Th... Thank you... I’ll value it...”

While she was crying at length, Koigasaki thanked me. I grew curious as to why she was crying. I feel that it would be a little lonely to be separated... From my friend. Seeing her crying face, I became unable to bear it.

“Koigasaki... I... Like you.”

Such words come from my mouth unconsciously. I was taken aback after saying it. Even though I already understand Koigasaki’s feelings...

What am I saying? What a persistent man it would take to confess again after being rejected once already. Koigasaki also is shocked, it should be clear that she thinks of this as a bother.

Timidly, I look at Koigasaki’s face. While crying, Koigasaki is surprised at looking at my face. She is holding tight onto the present I presented to her.

“...I’m sorry. I understand that you... Don’t like me. That these feelings are just a bother. But... No matter what, I wanted to get that through to you one more time. Knowing that you’re moving far away, I just can’t... Contain myself.”

“...”

“...You’re transferring, and will be separated from me...You’ll probably forget about me. That’s fine. But, I won’t forget about you. Probably...I’ll always like you. So... Just that, I wanted to get through to you at the least...”

Before I realized it, I was moved to tears. This might be the last day Koigasaki and I can speak. Thinking about that, I grow more and more sad...

At my words, Koigasaki looked down and was quiet for a while.

Ah... Once again, I’ve troubled Koigasaki...

“... Saying all this stuff again is just a nuisance... Sorry for getting all fired up on my own... It’s getting late, and we should start heading home...”

“I...”

“...Eh?”

Koigasaki picks up her head from looking down, and with her crying face, stares at me in the eye and says...

“I also... Like you...!”

... Eh?

Just now... What did she say? Just now, did I... Mishear something on a grand scale? Or, is this a dream?

“Koigasaki... Y-you...”

I couldn’t believe what Koigasaki had just said and was flustered.

I mean, when I confessed to her a month ago she said she didn’t like me and couldn’t go out with me in very clear terms.

What does this mean...!?

Koigasaki... Likes me? Then, after all, what was on that radio broadcast was Koigasaki’s... True feelings? If that’s true then why...?

“... Azuki-chan heard my submission that was read on the radio, and learned of my feelings... I myself thought that what I had done was so stupid. Because of that, I caused Azuki-chan to suffer... You also heard about it from Azuki-chan,

right?"

"...! A-ah. Azuki-chan recorded it and let me listen to it."

"Eh...!? Really?! Then, you also listened to that radio broadcast!?"

"Ah..."

"No... Seriously!?! I can't believe it!"

Koigasaki was completely red, even to her ears, and was terribly disturbed.
This reaction means...

"...What you said on the radio were... Your true feelings..."

Koigasaki is looking down while so red.

"... Y-yes..."

She affirmed it without looking me in the eye.

"So... When you told me you liked me... The truth is, I was incredibly happy..."

...! If so, why...

"But...I won't go out with you."

... My face goes totally pale at the words that she continued to say while crying. She likes me... But won't go out with me...?

"Eh... Wh-why's that...!? I don't understand what that means at all..."

Koigasaki wipes her tears and looks at me. For some reason, she smiled.

"... When we first met, you were clearly the plain, typical otaku who couldn't read a situation..."

"Eh!?"

"This is what I said but I really wondered if it was possible to turn you into a normal person."

Koigasaki suddenly started talking about something not related to the present situation, so I was unable to hide my confusion.

Wait, at the beginning is that what Koigasaki thought of me...

"But, the current you... So much so that I couldn't have imagined it when we

first met, have become normal. Though it doesn't seem that I myself had realized it... As you are now, like that, anyone can go out with you. You no longer need my help. Be assured and go on by yourself."

Koigasaki told me this... With a smile that seemed just a little lonely.

"Huuh!? Wh-what're you saying..."

I am normal? Like that, anyone can go out with me? No matter how you look at it, that's a serious exaggeration. Sure, compared to before, I also think that I've gotten better, but I don't think there's been such a dramatic change like Koigasaki is saying. Is Koigasaki saying this sincerely...?

"So...!"

Koigasaki says in a voice much louder than before, looking at me with a serious expression.

"Forget about me, who is moving far away, and go out with the one always at your side, always thinking of you!"

"...!"

Koigasaki... Th-that's...

Azuki-chan... Right?

Koigasaki desperately told me this with a saddened expression while her tears, which she had stopped, came pouring down again.

Almost as if she were urging me.

"Wh-what're you saying... That..."

That... Can't be done. To lie to my own emotions...

"Did you hear from Azuki-chan about where I'm moving to?"

"Eh? I... Didn't..."

"Hokkaido, you know. That's not a distance that allows us to meet easily..."

"...!"

Hokkaido...?

I couldn't imagine that she was moving to a place so far away.

“... B-but... If your father relocates, the possibility that you return to Tokyo...”

“That probability is... Almost none... Because Papa has been entrusted with the Hokkaido branch...”

“...!”

I became overwhelmed.

Such a far distance. The fact that she won't come back here again. I knew when Koigasaki was supposed to move out.

Koigasaki likes me.

However... She understood that she can't go out with me, due to this too-cruel reality. She was so troubled by herself and draw this conclusion within herself and rejected my confession.

What... Do I do?

Koigasaki will be so far away. Yet, I am confident that I will still like her.

—Within me, the answer soon came.

I close my eyes and think back to my days with Koigasaki.

“Koigasaki... I also often think back to the time when we first met.”

“Eh...?”

“I entered high school... I met you and at first you were threatening, and then you forced me to help you in your romance...”

“...!”

“But somewhere along the way, somehow... Between you and me, it was like we were buddies, or that a friendship, that kind of weird feeling came about... We made our agreement...”

When Koigasaki told me... “*You are my important friend*”

... I was so happy I could cry. When I got a message from Hasegawa, when I went on a date, when there was trouble with the outfit, I was helped beyond what mere teaching can do by Koigasaki.

“And on the other hand... I couldn't let it alone if you are crushed. Keep

fighting on, I'll also keep fighting on, so you also keep fighting on..."

At some point her being there gives me strength to fight on. It's not just my own strength. I'm not alone.

"I have become normal... If what you said earlier is true, and I have become just a little more normal, that is without a doubt because of you. I think if I was alone, to this day I would definitely not be able to speak to girls, I would have fun friends, and I would be living plain, boring days."

"Ka-Kashiwada..."

"But... It's odd. At some point... I unconsciously started getting irritated at you getting in good relations with Suzuki..."

"...! Eh..."

At my words, Koigasaki was round-eyed in astonishment. I finally said it to her.

Koigasaki is surprised at my words.

"We had our agreement, so I was in a position where I would have been happy to see the space between you and Suzuki shrink, yet for me to get jealous... I'm terrible..."

"...You're not terrible."

"Eh..."

Koigasaki shook her head and denied my words.

"I... I as well... Was like that..."

"Eh? What do you mean..."

"Like you... I too... Was jealous... Actually, I think I was always probably full of jealousy..."

Koigasaki says, seeming embarrassed.

Koigasaki was... Jealous because of me? I can't believe it.

While surprised, a feeling of gladness also overflows within me.

"Though I should have supported your love, I was just so jealous... At some

point, even though I was supposed to like Suzuki-kun, I started noticing you more and more... When I realized my feelings, I felt our relationship still was about the agreement... So, I said that we should quit the agreement."

"Ko-Koigasaki..."

So that's how it was...

"... Hey,"

I resolved myself, looked Koigasaki in the eye, and started speaking seriously.

"Sure enough, I... Like you. Your going to Hokkaido or any other far place won't change these feelings."

"... Kashi... wada..."

"It's not like you're going overseas... You're still in Japan, right? If I want to meet you, I can go to meet you."

"..."

"So... I can't give up. I don't want to give up."

This is the conclusion I have reached. With the distance between us being so far, I want to continue thinking of Koigasaki. At my words, Koigasaki was surprised and is staring blankly in amazement.

"So, please go ou..."

In the middle of my words, my mouth was blocked from speaking. By Koigasaki's hands.

"...!?"

"Just your feelings makes me glad. That's already enough..."

While crying, Koigasaki smiles and says this. Though it is incredibly bitter... She is worrying about me in showing that smile.

"Ko-Koigasaki..."

Now... No matter what.. It won't work out, is that right...?

Nothing will come out of it...?

Though we like each other so much...

Though we don't want to be separated...

Before I realize it, my eyes are also full of tears. Tears continue to pour without stopping from Koigasaki's eyes. No matter how hard she squeezes and squeezes my hand, they pour one after the other.

I don't know how much time passed. The tears finally stop, and Koigasaki, a little calmed down, at length raises her head.

"Hey, Kashiwada... It's my birthday, so I have just one request I want you to hear out."

"...! Wh-what!? Say whatever you wish! If it's something I can do, I'll do whatever it is you want!"

"...Then... Today, it's fine even just for one day..."

"I want to be your girlfriend."

While crying, Koigasaki asks of me one last thing. Without thinking, I hold Koigasaki tight. As though surprised by the sudden development, Koigasaki's body starts shivering with a start.

"I like you, Koigasaki..."

"... Kashiwa... da..."

Koigasaki's voice is quivering.

"... Name..."

"Eh?"

Koigasaki separated from me a little, and with a totally red face looks me in the eye and says such.

"Please... Call me by... My name as well... Properly, by my first name..."

"Eh..."

"Then, one more time, say it again..."

Seeming embarrassed, Koigasaki, with her face all red, whispered that to me. Her first name, eh... Of course, this would be the first time I call her by her first name. For some reason, I become very embarrassed.

“... Mo-Momo... I like you...”

“! I as well...”

At my words, though the tears falling down, Koigasaki smiles.

“I've always wanted to say it, but I couldn't... I really do... Like you! I love you.
I really, really love you!”



I once again held Koigasaki tight.

Overflowing with love, just like this, I want to never separate from Koigasaki forever. Despite having such mutual feelings for each other, we must be separated. I'm so powerless. I can't do anything, I'm such a small man.

I can't open up some new way, I can only go with the flow; after all, I'm just a child.

I gently close my eyes, and show her my affection through the arms I use to hold her.

"Momo... I like you."

"...Yeah."

"I like you."

"...Yeah...."

"I like you.."

"...(sob), Ye...ah..."

"I like you...!"

Like idiots, we repeated the same words over and over again to each other. During the whole time, Koigasaki was shaking and crying. While crying, though it seemed painful, she desperately kept responding to my words.

I didn't know how much time passed while we were hugging. It felt like a short amount of time, but in reality a lot more time passed than I imagined.

I want to hold onto her like this forever. I don't want to let go of her again. It would be good if time would stand still. It would be good if today would never end. I couldn't help wishing for such.

*

After that, of course, Koigasaki and I didn't become a genuine couple.

As per her wishes, we were only a couple for Koigasaki's birthday, that one day.

"Oh, Kashiwada, late night, every now and again I'd watch the TV since that anime you like is on, and it's surprisingly funny."

“Right!? It’s an anime so it can’t be too ridiculous!?”

“Heh, wait~ Even Kiritani has become an otaku through Kashiwada’s influence-?”

It’s been a few days since then, and now it’s lunch break. A girl in a seat next to us inserted her thoughts into the conversation that we had unfolding.

“Ah~ really, you’re no longer hiding that you are an otaku, but now you’re dragging others into it...”

“...!”

When I saw the female student who was adding to our own conversation, I was a little shocked.

“Koigasaki...”

“When you first entered high school you so desperately hid the fact that you were an otaku, but now just how much are you turning on that idea?”

“Haha... It’s fine. You also said that being able to become an otaku was fun, didn’t you?”

“Eh!? What, Momo has been an otaku?!”

“Well, yeah! I’ve done cosplay, and even put out doujinshi.”

Koigasaki said with a smiling face to a surprised female classmate.

Hey, Koigasaki... No matter how much of an open otaku you are, you don’t have to declare that at school, you know...?

We have now totally returned to our old “mutual friends” relationship.

That’s what Koigasaki wanted after all. Isn’t that one thing I can do for her if she wants that?

Until spring break, I will enjoy the fun days as “mutual friends” with Koigasaki, and these short, last days deeply carve up my heart. Returning to such a relationship with Koigasaki, naturally I return to being mutual friends with Azuki-chan, and after so long we three could laugh together again.

At length, that spring break comes upon us. I didn’t hear what date Koigasaki was leaving on. Had I heard it, I would go to see her off and the farewell would

have been painful. Koigasaki didn't tell me anything about it. She also probably didn't want me to go see her off.

Message from: Koigasaki Momo

Message: Today, I take off for Hokkaido. Thank you for everything up to now."

It was the later half of a day near the end of March. At my house, I receive that one message.

I see. It was today...

I read the message and, without sending a response, fold my cell phone closed.

It is fine like this...

..Is it really?

Because this is how she wanted it to be... Is it really fine left like this?

"...No..."

This isn't good...! Sure enough, I think if I can't meet with Koigasaki one last time, I will definitely regret it so much I will want to die.

In the instant I think this, I fervently leave my room, hurriedly get ready to leave, and rush out my house.

When is the flight that Koigasaki is leaving on? Will I make it in time if I hurry there?

While I fret like this, it is clear I don't want us to get separated like this. I want to really give her a good farewell. I want to see her off.

After a long while, I reach Haneda Airport and I get absorbed in asking the staff where the lobby for those taking a flight to Hokkaido is. After learning where it is, I run full-force over there, and I look for Koigasaki all around.

Koigasaki... Where are you? After I've come all this way here?

I recklessly look and eventually, far away, I spot a familiar sight from behind.

"Koigasaki-!"

Right there, I screamed in a loud voice.

“...!?”

Koigasaki turned around and grew stiff upon seeing me.

I ran to where Koigasaki was.

Koigasaki was talking to her family about something. Presently, Koigasaki's family leaves Koigasaki behind and leaves the area.

“Haah, haah, haah...”

“Kashiwada... I didn't think.. You would come...”

“Haah... If you're gonna let me know, let me know sooner...”

While I am out of breath, I look at Koigasaki's face. She is looking at me with a troubled-looking expression.

“I mean, I... Didn't want you to come see me off...”

Koigasaki's words shocked me a bit, but then I soon realized she means that separating would be painful.

This is... Really, truly, the last...

There was much I wanted to say.

However... They are all words that would cause Koigasaki to be troubled. So, I have those words in my heart, and must tell Koigasaki words that we can both smile and say our farewell with. As though Koigasaki is happily leaving for Hokkaido.

“Ah, well, Koigasaki...”

“Hm?”

“Take care.”

I make a smile and with as much of a bright attitude as I can muster, I tell Koigasaki words of farewell...

“...!”

Koigasaki was a little shocked at my line and then...

“Yeah, you too.”

She smiles, then returns the thought.

Good, now... I won't have any regrets. Yup, not any...

“...!?”

But at that moment, I...

Saw tears come out of the smiling Koigasaki's pupils.

“Ko-Koigasaki...!?”

“Eh...!? Ah, this... Oh no, really..”

Koigasaki hurriedly wiped away her tears.

“Really... This is why... I didn't want you to co-...”

The tears were already pouring one after the next without stopping.

“...”

Seeing Koigasaki cry like this, I feel a lump in my throat...

“No...”

“... Eh?”

“I don't... Want to be separated from you like this! I definitely don't want this —!”

Before I realize it, I'm absorbed in and yelling out my true feelings.

“Ka-Kashiwada...”

“I don't want to... Give up on you... I don't want to... Not be able to see you again!”

While Koigasaki was crying, she blankly listened to my words.

“And... You wanted it this way, so I pulled out my own views and have been doing as you wanted, but... I'm at my limit! Are we just supposed to ignore my emotions completely!? Even though I feel for you... So, so much... Saying you're going far away, so it is better if we don't go out... There's a limit to how self-serving you can be, right!? I really don't want that!”

I sorta spilled out what was inside me. The words I have been enduring not

saying have poured out.

Oh no, if I say this that'll be bad...

Is what I was thinking in my mind, yet the words didn't stop coming.

"... Self-serving? Wha-what's with that..."

She intercepted my by suddenly saying that in a low voice.

"H-how irritating! Are you really saying that! How super~~~~~ irritating!"

I was confounded by the suddenly livid Koigasaki.

"Self-serving!? That's you, isn't it?! You don't understand a tenth, no, a single percent of my feelings! Up to now, I've always, always had feelings for you! Yet you'd go out with other girls... With Azuki-chan, and didn't notice my feelings

at all

...! Just how much pain do you think I've had to endure this whole time up to now...!? I don't want to cry because of you any more...!"

"Eh...!"

Koigasaki yelled at me, worn out and crying. Because Koigasaki was yelling in a loud voice, those around us stared and turned their eyes to us. Koigasaki... Had felt for me so strongly? Because of me, she's been hurt and has cried...? Even though up to now, she hadn't said a word of this...

"You don't want to be separated from me!? You don't want to not be able to see me again!? To me... That, all of it... So much more than you, of course I don't want it, don't you know!?"

"Ko-Koigasaki..."

"Even though I've always wanted to be your girlfriend...! I've always endured it, and endured it... Yet, yet now, farewell... This time is different..."

Koigasaki cried and shouted with a bitter expression.

Koigasaki...

I wasn't the only one who didn't want to have to bid farewell... Yet, Koigasaki didn't show me that even a little bit, and has endured it all this time...

“Koigasaki... I’m sorry...”

While not understanding Koigasaki’s feelings, I selfishly got angry by myself...
At the very least, I’m such a no-good man.

“But if that is so... Then a long-distance relationship is fine, so we really can go out-”

“... I also want to do so! But... I can’t trust you!”

“Eh...!?”

When she turns her face to me and tells me that she can’t trust me, I take a great shock.

“I mean, if I’m not by your side... Sure enough, you’ll be with another girl!”

“Th-that’s...!”

“Over me, being so far away, you might be much happier with a girl who can properly be by your side... If we would start going out like this, I’ll go my way and I’d have no choice but to worry and worry every day... Over whether or not you’d come to like another girl. If I’d be like that, then it’d be better if we didn’t go out...!”

“Ko-Koigasaki..”

She thought about that, and decided against going out with me...

Despite me not knowing this myself, I’ve caused her a lot of anxiety... That is, of course, because as she said earlier, I didn’t realize her feelings at all and went out with Azuki-chan.

“S-so... I don’t know when or if Papa would let me, but... If I could become independent, and returned to Tokyo by myself... I could meet with you, Kashiwada, again, and if you weren’t dating anyone by that time... I could confess to you, I’ve thought about that... A lot...”

“Eh! Y-you...”

Koigasaki thought so far ahead like that? She was thinking of me so much?

“I... Definitely won’t go out with any other girl!”

“... Eh?”

Koigasaki opened her eyes wide in surprise at me who had so clearly declared such.

"My feelings aren't so half-baked as that! If it were such a poor resolution, I wouldn't say that to you. First, you are the one I think of the most; for me to date another girl in spite of that... That would be rude to her!"

In my mind, the face of one girl popped up. Yes. She, no matter with what emotion. We separated with...

To me, it was a very painful separation. Even now, if I think back to it, my chest feels like it is about to burst. However, more than me, she surely...

Yes, it wasn't like we split over some half-baked emotions.

"Ka-Kashiwa... da..."

Koigasaki stared blankly at my words.

"Even when we are apart, I will continue to think only of you... Without doubt."

"... Really? Really and truly?"

"Ah."

I resolved myself, and opened my mouth.

"In the future, I will definitely... Go to see you... So... So, when that time comes..."

"... Marry me!"

That may have been one of those silly things high school kids say. But, to me, it was something I said with my true feelings, without a hint of lie or deceit in them.

I said something pretty offbeat, so Koigasaki's response was a scary thing. In any case, wouldn't saying something like that so suddenly be... Cringy? I don't know if she believes my words or not...

"..."

With her eyes wide open, Koigasaki was at a loss for words in surprise.

"... Huuh? Wh-what are... You... Are you st-stupi...d? To really say something like that... We're high schoolers, you know? First, you have way too many romantic interests, I can't trust you... And of course something like that is impossible..."

... Ah, of course. That'd be the normal reaction...

Suddenly, Koigasaki let go of the carry case she had been holding. Then she briskly walked near me.

The next moment.

"—!?"

Koigasaki wrapped both her arms around my neck to put her lips on my lips.

Koigasaki and I had our first... Kiss. It was fairly sudden, so I didn't understand what was going on.

"..."

Eventually, slowly, Koigasaki separated her lips from mine.

"Is it OK... For me to believe you?"

Koigasaki asked me with tears piling up in her eyes with a heartrending expression.

"A啊... Of course! Definitely!"

"... I'll be waiting."

"Koigasaki..."

"Even when I'm an adult or when I'm an old lady... I'll be waiting for you to come visit me."

... That is Koigasaki's response.

"Buha"

I reflexively burst into laughter.

"Hey!? Wh-what's with that reaction!?"

"An old lady... Just how long am I making you wait!?"

"I-I mean..."

"I'll come meet you... Much sooner."

With all my might I wrap both my arms around Koigasaki in embrace. It felt like the eyes of the people in the airport were gathering on us, but right now none of that matters.

Epilogue

“Naoki!? Hey, how long are you going to sleep-!?”

“Woah!?”

She vigorously took the cover off of me as I open my eyes.

In front of my eyes was my little sister... Akari standing imposingly.

“What’re you doing!?”

“Just how long do you plan to sleep!? It’s the first day of Golden Week. It’s already almost evening!? Weren’t you supposed to meet your friends today!?”

“Eh... Aaah!”

I look at the clock. It was 3:30 in the afternoon. Oh no, I overslept way too much because it’s a day off.

“Really~ You’ve become a working member of society, yet you’re still doing stuff like this?”

“I can’t help it, I’ve been sleep-deprived lately... I came home on the last train of the day again yesterday...”

“Doing this to a newly hired employee, is your company uncaring of labor standards?”

“No, I hear quite a few other companies do such as well... Fua~”

“Hmm... Is that how the publishing industry is? Putting aside its treatment of workers, your company is the largest in the industry, right, so do you get to meet with famous authors and mangaka?! Hey, if you ever meet a mangaka I like, I’d want you to get an autograph for me-”

“Eh, don’t say such crazy stuff... My work is with ordinary literature, so I don’t really have an opportunity to meet mangaka and stuff...”

“Eh~. Really, how useless~”

My little sister who just started her second year at college puffs out her

cheeks and pouts at me. She's so immature it is difficult to believe that she will soon be an adult. Just from the outside, she's grown and wears makeup and stuff like an adult.

No matter how you look at her she seems like a lovely woman in college, but... On the inside, she's still very childlike that I don't think she's matured very much since she was in middle school.

It seems only her level of being an otaku has grown, and it seems that lately she's drawn her own doujinshi and has joined a circle at an event. Though she is 19, I have not heard anything about her having ever getting a boyfriend and while she's my sister, she makes me worry about her a lot.

"Oh no! There's no time to waste on a leisurely chatting."

I, in an extreme rush, get ready to go. We haven't met in a long time... I can't look too bad when I get to meet them. I enter into the bathroom, choose and wear my clothes, and style my hair. Like this, I rush out of the house.

In the train, I notice I received a message. The sender was Hasegawa Midori. We were in the same grade in highschool and... I used to like her. Not frequently, but from time to time we get in touch, and with Yamamoto-senpai, her big brother, we get drinks together, the three of us. To me, she's one of my few female friends with whom I have a good relationship.

The contents of the message was about how she wanted to go to the class reunion of our high school first year class that we were talking about. That she wanted very much to participate in it.

A class reunion, eh... I do want to meet my high school first year classmates after so long, and I would be glad to participate. I haven't been able to meet with the one I was closest with in that class, Kiritani, lately, too.

I quickly respond to Hasegawa. Now, Hasegawa is a high school teacher. I think that is her calling. If the teacher is so beautiful, the boys in class will surely be happy... Though I joke in saying such, I think her seriously kind heart and dislike of what is unfair is well-suited to being a teacher.

Eventually I arrive at Ikebukuro station, and head toward the appointed spot, which was a bar.

Yes, today is a promise I made with friends I haven't seen in months.

"Ah... Kashiwada-kun! It's been a while~!"

"Kashiwada-san, it's been a while ♪"

"Sorry for being late! I slept into the evening..."

I see faces I haven't seen in while, girls from high school, Sakurai Azuki-chan, Murasaki-san, and Sagawa Yukari-san.

"Eh~ into the evening!? Sure enough, being an editor is pretty difficult, huh..."

"I'm still not at all used to it yet and I'm exhausted every day..."

"You've worked pretty hard, Kashiwada-san. What do you want to drink?"

"Ah, I guess some draft! Murasaki-san, haven't you already drunk pretty well yourself?"

"Oh no! It's not like when I was young, I have to look forward to everyday to refrain from so much alcohol..."

"No, you're pretty young even now!"

These words were not just a compliment, Murasaki-san's appearance hasn't changed much since we've first met. It's been a while since we've met, but I'm realized that she hasn't changed at all.

"But, Azuki-chan also has got it rough, no? You hear that the gaming industry is pretty difficult..."

"Yeah, the designers and such sleep at their workplace and that seems pretty rough, but I'm a planner, so aside from right before a deadline, I don't have it so bad."

Azuki-chan is employed at a company making an Otome game. It's a famous company that even I know, so I think it's pretty amazing that she got hired there.

"Ah, oh yeah, Murasaki-san's manga is finally officially getting an anime! Congratulations!"

"Oh my, you sure are an editor. You got that info pretty quickly ♪"

Murasaki-san got her official debut as a mangaka when I was still studying in college, and she currently works hard at being a n illustrator and working as a mangaka.

She's been in the world of doujinshi since she was in college, but she is now in a serialized commercial magazine and has experienced quite some popularity and success.

And I... Am employed at a publishing company and struggle as the editor for general literature. It's been a month since I joined the company, and I've been returning home late every night. I'm still not used to it, so I have times where I get mad or feel bitter but it's work that I enjoy, so I work hard at it... Or rather, I have to work hard at it! That's what I'm thinking at where I am now.

"And, Kashiwada-kun, you proofread Momo-chan's work back in high school, right? You've seemed to have a knack for it ever since then!"

"Eh? Ah... You remember it well!"

Yes, what made me aspire to be an editor was... When during high school, I proofread Koigasaki's rough draft and she told me I seemed to "fit this type of work"; that was my impetus.

After deciding on what I wanted to do, I worked hard and desperately studied, got into a somewhat good college, and got hired onto a good company.

"Speaking of Momo-san... That drama based on her original work is finally starting during the summer, right? I loved that story, so I really look forward to it♪"

"...! Ah, yes... That's what it looks like. I believe it was during September..."

"That's really incredible~! During high school, the stories Momo-chan would write were really interesting, but to think that she would really become a writer!"

Yes. Though it may come as a surprise... The same Koigasaki whose first doujinshi story I looked over and criticized in high school has become a writer.

She mainly writes romance stories, but her support is full of female readers who say things such as "This is a good depictions of a woman's heart" and "It

sent my heart aflutter” and such such, and now she sells really well. As Murasaki-san said, one of her novels is getting an original TV drama starting this summer.

“With this magazine calling her a “too-beautiful writer” and publishing her photos and such, it feels like she’s growing farther and farther away, eh~...”

“Indeed, this started when she started being an amateur model for a regional fashion magazine, right?”

“Ah, sure seems like it. She’s pretty famous over there too...”

I also couldn’t have imagined that Koigasaki would become a writer. Or that I, who gave her advice for her work, while we were still kids, would now be an editor.

“When is she going to next come to Tokyo... I wanna see Momo-chan...”

“How about we go visit her♪ Everyone’s gotten used to their jobs and things have calmed down... How about during the Obon festival?”

“Hey, that’s a good idea! That’ll be about the time I get my first bonus, too!”

Azuki-chan and I both smile in agreement at Murasaki-san’s suggestion.

“Ah, oh yeah, Kashiwada-kun’s friend is also making his major debut, right?”

“Ah, yes!”

What Azuki-chan is talking about is my friend... My best friend during high school, Suzuki Souta. Since then, Suzuki has continued with his band. During college he won the grand prize in a band contest and has preparations to debut with a record label and seems to have made his major debut just a little earlier.

I didn’t think any of my friends would become a performer like that, so when he told me about it, I was pretty surprised.

Suzuki himself now has social interactions, but, same as always, he’s a serious otaku, and even as his fans grow and he comes more popular, rather than get a girlfriend, he runs to the world of 2D. Coming this far, he has my respect. Looking at it like this, those around me are all truly incredible people.

Be that as it may... I look at the girls’ faces and think. That we became friends

during high school, and can have fun meeting and talking like this now that we are adults... Is truly a great thing.

Especially Azuki-chan, though there was a time when she wouldn't talk to me at all, now we were able to return to being mutual friends, and I think that makes me glad from the bottom of my heart.

Thinking back... Really, a lot happened with Azuki-ahn.

I say that, but really oh so much mainly just happened during the first year of high school. Then, she stopped talking to me completely, but since the second year of high school, we were able to go back to being normal mutual friends.

I learned a lot of important things from Azuki-chan. We had a lot of fun times together. The beautiful memories of my youth lies deep in my heart. Now, it's embarrassing, so I don't bring it up at all.

Then we continue to talk a great deal. Updates about our lives. About otaku things. Sure enough, talking with trusted otaku friends is fun. I strongly feel that I want to always.. Stay in good relations as close friends with these two. Having such fun time had passed quickly.

“Phew~ I drank quite a bit~”

We leave the shop and walk on the path to the station.

“Kashiwada-san, aren't your steps a bit staggered? When you were in high school, you made fun of me when I was drunk, but it looks like you don't have the right to do that anymore~”

“No, no, today it is you who drank the most~ I can never match you in drinking~”

“Murasaki-san is strong with alcohol, so she is fine, however Kashiwada-kun is weak to alcohol, so he drank too much! Are you alright like this, Kashiwada-kun?”

“Eh?

“After all, Kashiwada-kun, tomorrow is an incredibly important day, right?”

“...!”

“That’s right, Kashiwada-san... Please do try your best!”

Azuki-chan and Murasaki-san both look at my face with encouraging expressions. Yes, tomorrow is... As Azuki-chan said, an incredibly important day to me.

To Azuki-chan and Murasaki-san’s words, I...

“Yes!”

I gave a vigorous reply.

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The next day.

I get out of my airplane after an hour and half long flight at New Chitose Airport. To make up for my usual lack of sleep, I intended to sleep during the trip, but I was too nervous and couldn’t get into the right state to go to sleep, so I couldn’t even nap.

Yes, today, I— came all the way to Hokkaido by myself. I get my luggage, step out of the airport, and a breeze so cold you wouldn’t think it was still May grazed my cheeks. I lament that it would have been a good idea to wear a trench-coat.

—Today, since morning, my heart has been beating fast with no stopping it. I put on the best suit I have, but annoying thoughts like what to do if she doesn’t like it run through my mind.

Anyhow, I didn’t tell that the one I’m meeting was going to meet her. With only the address on a New Year’s card to go off of, I get the directions from my smartphone as I ride in the train from the nearest train station to get closer to my location.

Yeah... If I mess anything up, wouldn’t it make me just some stalker? Ah, with how worried I am, maybe I really should have at least told her something about this...

I get closer to the location, I eventually spot a particularly magnificent house. I confirm the nameplate. Sure enough, there’s no mistake. I resolve myself and press the intercom.

"Yes?"

My heart skips a beat at hearing that cute voice I was used to hearing.

Could this be herself?

"... Th-this is Kashiwada! Is Momo-san in right now!?"

"...! Ah, eh... Please wait for a moment."

The beating of my heart grows increasingly violent. A door opens up from a large entrance way, and a lone girl walked out.

"Kashiwada~ It's been so long!"

"...!?"

I look at the person as a feeling of shock come to me. Somehow, it seemed the girl in front of my eyes was a little bit younger than she had been during high school. But, her appearance and voice were the same in high school as it is now.

Just... What is this!?

"E-eh...?"

Koigasaki (?) looks over my face and hugs me with all her might.

"I've wanted to see you~~~! You've become more attractive than you ever were in high school! Though you're my boyfriend, I haven't been able to meet you and was so lonely, but finally you've come to visit me!?"

"E-e-eh..."

"Waaaaiiiit up!"

"...!?"

The front door was vigorously opened as a different girl came rushing out. For some reason, she yelled in a loud voice while flustered. Indignant, she came to where we were.

"What are you doing, baka Yuzu! What're you doing to ano-another's... Boyfriend!?"

"...Koigasaki...?"

My girlfriend whom I am meeting after a year... Is even prettier than the last time I met her.

"He's also Yuzu's boyfriend!~!"

"He... Heeeey!? This is Yuzu-chan!?"

I was astonished at learning the identity of the girl hugging me.

"Who else did you think it was...!? Ah, Yuzu, let go of him already!"

This is Koigasaki's little sister Yuzu-chan...!?

The last time I saw Yuzu-chan, I was in high school, so it's been about seven years. Now, though she appears a little smaller, she's about the same height as Koigasaki.

After being told to by Koigasaki, Yuzu-chan obediently broke away from me.

"And wait a minute, why... Did you suddenly come here...!? I-I-I can't believe it.... You didn't tell me or anything... Actually, what's with that outfit...!?"

Looking at me... My girlfriend Koigasaki Momo's face goes totally red and she is incredibly flustered.

"A-ah... To-today...I have something important to talk with you about..."

I was nervous and my voice was shaking.

"Something important to talk about...?!"

"...Yuzu, please go back inside the house~"

From my disposition, she could tell something was happening and Yuzu returned to the entrance. Though she may be a kid still, she has grown enough to be able to read the mood.

"...Wha-what... Is this important thin-"

Koigasaki looks at me like she might be angry.

"A-ah... Well..."

"... Actually, what's with you! You said you'd come visit me next time... Just how long do you think it's been since the last time we met!?"

"...Y-yes, I'm sorry..."

I look at Koigasaki, and her eyes begin to tear up a little. I start feeling guilty.

“And I don’t get your responses very quickly here... I thought that maybe you had come to like an-another... Girl...

Koigasaki’s voice grew lower and lower. It may be her holding back tears. She was thinking that... Unbeknownst to me, I’ve been making Koigasaki worry like this...

“I truly am sorry... Even though I told you to wait... I had decided that it would be better if we didn’t meet often until I found a job and really became a full-fledged adult. You debuted as a writer, and quickly became such an amazing person, so I wanted to quickly catch up. I thought that if I don’t try hard myself, I won’t be qualified to be called your boyfriend...”

“... You thought that...?”

Koigasaki looked at me with a surprised face.

I resolve myself, breathe, and start talking.

“I was finally able to become a full-fledged adult. I was able to become someone who could meet you with his head held high.”

“Ka-Kashiwada...”

“I’ve made you wait quite a long time...”

I pull out of a paper bag and offer to Koigasaki a bouquet of roses I bought on the way to her house.

Even I thought it was an excessive production.

It is her, she might complain that it’s cold or that I am overdoing it or such like back in high school.

“Eh...?! Wait, what is... Th...is!?”

But Koigasaki’s reaction was different than I had imagined... She was terribly surprised and flustered, and seemed to be like she was caught up in confusion.

“Koigasaki Momo-san.”

I call her name and Koigasaki stands up straight in surprise.

With a serious expression, I look her in the eye.

"Will you... Marry me?"

At my proposal, Koigasaki put her hand to her mouth in great surprise and tears started coming from her eyes...

"...Yes."

Presently, she smiled and nodded.

